

# Composing for Digital Publication: Rhetoric, Design, Code

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We begin our discussion of the state of digital publication with the claim that, at this historical moment, nearly all composition is digital composition. But, as a field, composition studies has not yet made that shift completely explicit in our discussions of composing processes and writing pedagogies. A deeper engagement with this very rapid shift in modes, genres, and media of textual production is not only warranted but critical for building literacies and research in writing and writing studies. Part of the reason for this lack of digital literacy development may be that the rationale for adding multiple literacies in design and code—areas traditionally not considered part of our fields of expertise—needs to be more clearly stated in order to be considered as part of the foundations—the infrastructures—of composing (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill). Based on our nearly two decades of work with *Kairos*, we posit that the infrastructural considerations for digital composing in the form of webtext publishing include

- the *scholarly* (whether a disciplinary field allows/values webtexts),
- the *social* (how a field or journal behaves when implementing those values within the publishing process), and
- the *technical* (whether and how systems support the perpetuity of scholarly and social infrastructures). (Eyman & Ball)

But these considerations are difficult to concretely include in classroom practice, so we offer three critical practices for composition that accommodate the many media, modes, and delivery mechanics in use today: rhetoric, design, and code.

## Rhetoric

In many ways, the rhetorical dimensions of digital texts are no different from those of print or oral texts—all of which require attention to the rhetorical situation (the purpose and argument forwarded by the writer/performer/designer, the needs and expectations of the audience, and the overall sociocultural context of the communication, regardless of medium). For born-digital webtexts that engage multiple modes and media as a function of their genre, additional rhetorical concerns arise with regard to decisions about delivery, access(ability), and sustainability. Authors of webtexts need to ask themselves: is this work best presented in a more linguistically rich (written) or visually

rich (images, layout, video, etc.) format? To what degree does interaction help to express the argument? Is an audio component necessary for this particular form? Etc. It is critical for webtext designers to consider the ramifications of these decisions on the relative *use*, *usability*, and *usefulness* of their text: “use” focuses on how the audience/user will make use of the webtext or digital object; “usability” speaks to the degree to which the users’ needs have been taken into account in the design of a text; and “usefulness” (in the academic context) is tied to the disciplinary networks in which a text is designed to circulate (that is, to what extent is it useful to readers?). A text that is usable but not useful will be unsuccessful, just as texts that are useful but not usable are also unsuccessful. Authors must consider all three aspects when designing digital texts.

## Design

Discussing design as a rhetorical move still feels fairly new in our field, despite scholars’ previous discussions of design-as-rhetoric (Buchanan; Sheppard; Wysocki) and webtextual journals such as *Kairos* and *Computers & Composition Online* publishing designed scholarship for almost 20 years. How can our field—in our scholarship, our classes, our conferences—move toward design as integral to our arguments and as part of our invention processes? Design is a rhetorical function that plays an important role in each of the canons of rhetoric, most obviously related to style (particularly in terms of visual rhetoric), but also of organization. Instead of saying what design *is*, most design theorists describe what design *does*. Donald Norman describes how design should function, arguing that it should make conceptual models visible, including showing required or alternative actions and their possible results, and should do so easily and naturally for the user (187). These design approaches are easily applicable to physical and digital objects: Webtext authors embrace design so that the conceptual model they use is relevant to the text’s purpose and media. (See also Kuhn, Johnson, and Lopez’s description of *conceptual core*.) The challenge is to see texts (even word-processed texts) as objects that require design.

At *Kairos*, we embrace design as part of the invention process through our (pedagogically informed) mentorship of authors in pre-submission collaborations and through our collaborative peer review process (Ball). We then edit their designs (including the code, as needed) for sustainability, accessibility, usability, and readability. All of these are rhetorical concerns: an author who chooses to design her piece in Adobe Flash chooses a limited set of sustainable, accessible, usable, and readable features that may change over time, or even disappear (see Sorapure). These design choices function as part of a webtext’s

scholarly and technical infrastructures as well as part of the social infrastructure of *Kairos's* collaborative authorial and editorial workflows.

## Code

Code is the underlying structure that has to function properly in order for a digital text to achieve its design goals and support the rhetorical functions of usability and accessibility. Code is, in a way, analogous to grammar—in order to function properly it needs to adhere to certain standards: it must be well-formed and conform to a formal register that is (generally) enforced by the systems that interpret and execute the code. Code is also the underlying infrastructure that both drives interactivity and sets constraints on possible user actions, and in this way code is intimately tied to design and rhetoric. The features of code that bind the webtext and set the parameters for use map onto what Ian Bogost (2011) has described as procedural rhetorics; that is, the rhetorical functions enacted at the level of code that promote certain user activity over other possibilities. As such, it is equally important for authors of digital texts to understand and engage with the coding aspects of a webtext with as much rigor as the rhetorical and design aspects.

In pedagogical terms, code need not be equated with programming; indeed, most work with code for digital composition that we edit in *Kairos* takes the form of markup such as HTML. Coding as literate practice also includes knowledge of appropriate file formats and technical infrastructure, such as knowing which graphic formats are most effective for a given image, which encoding schemes will be most usable for delivering audio and video via the Web, and the importance of including transcripts and technical devices that ensure accessibility to the greatest number of users. We also consider metadata as related to coding because it is typically inserted into digital texts at the level of code rather than integrated visually into the text itself. The active construction of metadata should be a compositional practice because it is emblematic of the ways an author deploys rhetoric, design, and code as the means by which a given webtext engages scholarly, social, and technical infrastructure (see also Bono, Hisayasu, Sayers, and Wilson).

Webtext authors (and, by virtue of the digital nature of text production, *all* authors) need to fully respond to all three of layers of digital composing—rhetoric, design, and code—in order to craft effective, persuasive arguments. Our charge to the readers of *Composition Studies*, then, is to consider the ways in which our scholarly work, our research, and our pedagogical practices could support all three elements. And once you do that, we expect you to send us more great work to publish in *Kairos*.

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