

Excerpt from *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Linda Adler-Kassner & Elizabeth Wardle (Eds.), forthcoming from Utah State University Press.

## 2d - All Writing is Multimodal

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*Multimodal* means *multiple* + *mode*. In contemporary writing studies, a mode refers to a way of meaning-making, or communicating. The New London Group (NLG) (1996) outlines five modes through which meaning is made: Linguistic, Aural, Visual, Gestural, and Spatial. Any combination of modes makes a multimodal text, and all texts—every piece of communication that a human composes—use more than one mode. Thus, all writing is multimodal.

Historically, rhetoric and composition studies is often assumed to focus on writing (and sometimes speech) as solely alphanumeric-based communication—what the NLG would label as part of the linguistic mode of communication. The term *mode*, within this historical perception, was reserved for defining the rhetorical modes of exposition, argumentation, description, and narration. In multimodal theory, the definition of *mode* is complicated to distribute equal emphasis on how meanings are created, delivered, and circulated through choices in design, material composition, tools and technologies, delivery systems, and interpretive senses (see **1c**, “Writing Expresses and Shares Meaning”; **1i**, “Writing is a Technology”). That is, *mode* isn’t just words (in the linguistic sense of NLG’s framework) but sound, texture, movement, and all other communicative acts that contribute to the making of meaning.

While the concept of multimodality has enjoyed increased circulation since the turn of the 21st century and been associated with new media or new technologies, rhetoric and composition’s historic approach to the teaching of writing has almost always included the production of multimodal texts. This understanding can be traced from classical rhetorical studies of effective speech design including body and hand gestures, to current concerns with infographics and visual rhetorics.

With this context in mind, there are still two major misconceptions associated with multimodality. First, some assume that all multimodal texts are digital. While it’s true that most writing and design work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is mediated through digital technologies such as a computer, smartphone, or tablet, many texts that might be produced with digital technologies aren’t necessarily distributed with digital technologies (e.g., posters, flyers, brochures, memos, some reports, receipts, magazines, books, scholarly print-based articles, etc.). In addition, many texts are not digital in their production *or* distribution (‘zines, paintings, scrapbooks, etc.).

Second, some assume that the opposite of multimodal is monomodal. In fact, there is no such thing as a monomodal text. This assumption is a throwback to the romantic version of writing as focusing solely on alphanumeric textual production and analysis and is often used by scholar-teachers new to multimodal theory as a way to distinguish between “old” ways of researching and teaching writing and “new,” multimodal ways (see the discussion of writing and disciplinarity in **2c**, “Writing is a Way of Enacting Disciplinarity”). An example of a text that is often referred to as being monomodal is the traditional first-year-composition research essay (see **concept 2**, “Writing Speaks to Situations and Contexts”). Yet, such a text is recognized not only from its linguistic mode and its visual and spatial arrangement on the page (title, name block, double-spacing, margins, default font size, formulaic structure, etc.).

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Monomodality, then, is used (incorrectly) to signify a lack of multiple media or modes when really what a user might mean is that a structure like a five-paragraph essay *privileges* the linguistic mode over the spatial or visual modes. Thus, writing as a knowledge-making activity (see **concept 2**, “Writing Speaks to Situations and Contexts”) isn't limited to understanding writing as a single mode of communication, but as a multimodal, performative (see **1e**, “Writing Mediates Activity”; **2e**, “Writing is Performative”) activity that takes place within any number of genres (see **2b**, “Genres Are Enacted”) and disciplines.

## References

New London Group. 1996. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (1). Accessed September 27, 2013. [http://wwwstatic.kern.org/filer/blogWrite44ManilaWebsite/paul/articles/A\\_Pedagogy\\_of\\_Multiliteracies\\_Designing\\_Social\\_Futures.htm](http://wwwstatic.kern.org/filer/blogWrite44ManilaWebsite/paul/articles/A_Pedagogy_of_Multiliteracies_Designing_Social_Futures.htm).