Chapter 1: “What are Multimodal Projects?”

Academic essays, biology posters, statistical Powerpoints, and lolcats ... what do all of these texts have in common? They are all multimodal. The word *multimodal* is a mash-up of *multiple* and *mode*. A *mode* is the resource through which communication is expressed, such as the words (a linguistic mode) we’re using to communicate our ideas in this paragraph. *Multimodal* describes the multiple ways we combine various communicative modes in everyday life. Lolcats, for instance, are multimodal. They combine photographs of cats (the visual mode), which are humorously captioned with “lolspeak” (the linguistic mode, specifically grammatically incorrect Internet slang), to make people laugh. Authors of lolcats choose the photo (usually based on what the cats are doing and how that action might make for a good caption), decide where to place the caption on the photo, and what color and typeface to use for the caption. All of these design choices are based on the preexisting lolcat meme, a parody genre often distributed on the Web.

Figure 1.1: We promise this book won’t slap you for “doin it wrong.” We hope to give you the tools to be able to produce awesome multimodal texts and to give excellent constructive feedback to your co-authors or classmates on their multimodal projects. (http://icanhascheezburger.com/2008/03/25/funny-pictures-constructive-feedback-ur-doin-it-wrong/)
Every writer chooses modes of communication for every text she creates (however, sometimes these choices are unconscious, like when we use the default typeface and margins when writing a paper for class). By text, we mean any kind of artifact or document that has been composed or designed via human intervention. Texts can be anything from a lolcat to a concert teeshirt to a dictionary. In order to produce a successful text, writers need to be able to consciously use different modes both alone and in combination to communicate their ideas to others.

Whether at school, on the job, or just in everyday life, multimodal texts have become an essential part of communication practices in nearly every arena of contemporary culture. The widespread use of design and media software, Web 2.0 technologies, and other digital media has increased opportunities to convey information and has also changed the expectations of readers. Our job in this book is to show you how to make conscious multimodal choices in the texts you create. We'll talk more about communicative modes and how they work and show you how to analyze and create multimodal texts like lolcats, or biology posters, PowerPoints, and reports—basically, any kind of writing for any kind of situation!

The Modes, How Do They Work?

It is hard to think of a text that is not multimodal—newspapers, science reports, advertisements, billboards, scrapbooks, music videos...the list is endless. Consider, for example, all of the modes at play in a simple TV commercial—there is usually music, the voice of an announcer, video showing the product, text on the screen giving you a price or a web address, and much more. Each of these modes plays a role in the advertiser's argument for why you should buy their product. The music is selected to give the product a certain feel (maybe young and hip or safe and reliable). The gender, tone, volume, and other qualities of the announcer's voice are chosen based on who the advertiser is trying to reach. The choice of whether to use video or animation, color or black and white, slow motion or other special effects, real people or actors are all deliberate modal considerations based on what the advertiser is trying to sell and to whom. Although each mode plays a role in the overall message, it is the combination of modes as a whole—the multimodality—that creates the full piece of communication.

In order to help you think through the different modes that may comprise a multimodal text, we draw on the work of The New London Group—a collection of education and literacy scholars—who first promoted the concept of multimodal literacies. They outlined five modes of communication that they found could be applied to all texts. These five modes include the linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial.

This next section will help you better understand how individual modes work. In order to call your attention to the modes, we provide a short definition, a brief analysis and a quick activity below for each. Note that the analyses are just a starting place, in that there is often much that can be said about what may seem like a small choice.

Linguistic Mode
The linguistic mode refers to the use of language, which usually means written or spoken words. When we think about the ways the linguistic mode is used to make or understand meaning, we can consider issues like:
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- word choice (vocabulary options)
- delivery (spoken, written)
- organization (phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc.)
- coherence (how individual words and ideas are developed and related)

While these aren’t the only possibilities for understanding how the linguistic mode works, this list gives you a starting place to consider how words and language function. And although we’ve listed it first, and it’s the mode writers have the most practice with, the linguistic mode is not necessarily the most important mode of communication. (That depends on what other modes are at play in a text as well as the rhetorical situation in which the text is used.)

The linguistic mode and the ability to use it carefully matters very much in contemporary communication. Take for example a widely criticized comment made by BP chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg following the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After meeting with President Obama, he announced that his company was committed to the cleanup and “care[s] about the small people.” Although he was likely trying to refer to BP’s commitment to helping individual citizens, the word choice “small people” infuriated the public because it demeaned those impacted and implied the disruption to their lives was of minimal concern.

To Do
Read the following statement, released by the White House shortly after the catastrophic 2011 Japanese earthquake:

Our thoughts and our prayers remain with the people of Japan. The President has been kept fully briefed on developments and the response throughout the weekend. As directed by the President, we have offered our Japanese friends whatever assistance is needed as America will stand with Japan as they recover and rebuild.

What linguistic choices do you notice here? Are there any word choices or phrasings that you feel are particularly effective? If so, which ones and why?

Visual Mode
The visual mode refers to the use of images and other characteristics that readers see. Billboards, flyers, television, websites, even grocery store shelves bombard those of us with eyesight with visual information and try to attract our attention. We can use this mode to communicate representations of how something looks or how someone is feeling, to instruct, to persuade, and to entertain, among other things. Use of the visual mode can be enacted through various design choices such as:
- color
- layout
These Twitter profiles (figure 1.2 and 1.3) have a lot of words (the linguistic mode), but the visual mode—the colors, layout, profile pictures, and logo—play a big role in how users read and understand the page. The designers of Twitter chose how to layout the page (with the tweets in the left column and info about the user in the right) and these two users chose these particular design templates and profile images.

To Do
Look closely at the visual mode in the above Twitter profiles (figure 1.2 and 1.3) or go online to check out two of your friends’ Twitter profiles. What visual differences do you see between the two profiles? Do these differences shape your understanding of the person behind the profile? What do you assume he/she is like? What do you assume he/she uses Twitter for? Do you have a Twitter profile? What visual template did you choose and why?

Aural Mode
The aural mode focuses on sound. Whether we are talking about a PowerPoint presentation, a video demonstration, sound effects on a website or the audio elements of a radio program, the aural mode provides multiple ways of communicating and understanding a message, including:

- music
- sound effects
- ambient noise/sounds
- silence
- tone of voice in spoken language
- volume of sound
- emphasis and accent
Although most of us are used to hearing sound all around us every day, we don’t often pay attention to how it signals information, including feelings, responses, or needed actions. It’s easy to conceive how a spoken message communicates, but what about the increasingly tense background music in a drama or the sounds we hear when we turn on a computer that let us know it is starting up? Whether big or small, each of these aural components conveys meaning.

The opening theme song for *The Colbert Report*—a satirical political pundit news program on Comedy Central—famously ends with the sounds of a screeching bald eagle. [[listen here (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IIE7XDRfAk) or watch the intro at (http://www.colbertnation.com)]]. The eagle screech functions in several ways. The visual of the eagle flying onto screen is an ironic symbolization of Colbert’s patriotism, since the bald eagle is the national bird of the United States yet Colbert’s use of it, beak-first on-screen and screeching, is threatening in a way that, perhaps, isn’t the typical patriotic feel-good symbol the eagle usually represents in the U.S. Aurally, the sharp screech signals the end of the theme song and the beginning of the program itself, and in this way it acts as a transition from the introductory music to the audience applause and Colbert’s stage entrance.

**To Do**

Watch this short clip at [http://ix.bedfordstmartins.com/color/analyze.htm](http://ix.bedfordstmartins.com/color/analyze.htm). What aural modal elements do you hear? What effect do these have on the tone of the piece? How would the tone of the video change if a country or bluegrass song were playing in the background?

**Spatial Mode**

The spatial mode is about physical arrangement. This can include how a brochure opens and the way it leads a reader through the text. It can refer to the placement of navigation on a webpage so that it provides access for the user. It can also help us to understand why physical spaces, such as grocery stores or classrooms, are arranged in particular ways to encourage particular kinds of behaviors (such as facing all chairs in a classroom towards the center of a room to encourage discussion and collaboration). The spatial mode includes:

- arrangement
- organization
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Attention to the spatial mode has become increasingly important as we create content for and interact within online environments. Authors need to pay attention to how content is organized so that readers can find their way through in the clearest way possible.

Notice how the spatial mode is used in the interface for IX: Visualizing Composition (Figure 1.5). A user may see the logo for IX first, or may focus on the spatial arrangement of the tutorial images, which as a grouping provide an enticing focal point for the site. This use of space allows the publisher (Bedford/St. Martin’s) to provide a quick visual branding of IX while simultaneously leading users into the tutorials themselves.

To Do
Visit the homepage for your or a nearby university website. Notice how the spatial mode is used—where is your eye drawn? How are the elements on the page laid out? What effect does this spatial arrangement have on how you read, use, and understand the information? How would it be different if, say, the information found in the center of the page were suddenly swapped with the information at the bottom?

Gestural Mode
The gestural mode refers to the way movement, such as body language, can make meaning. When we interact with people in real life or watch them on the screen, we can tell a lot about how they are feeling and what they are trying to communicate. This includes:

- facial expressions
- hand gestures
- body language
- interaction between people

The gestural has always been important in face-to-face conversations or in performed texts like plays, but understanding the gestural mode is just as important when communication takes place through virtual interactions on screen. Whether we are participating in a video conference with colleagues, a gaming raid with friends, or an online chat with family, the

Figure 1.5 (http://ix.bedfordstmartins.com)
gestural mode provides an important way of connecting (or showing disconnect) from people.

The gestural is a very important mode for anyone in television, and can often make or break the success of a news anchor. Consider, for example, how Katie Couric opened her first newscast standing alongside, rather than sitting behind, the news desk [(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O14cE6GOfb8)]. She then closed this newscast by sitting on the desk [(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PheVwqg68&NR=1)]. These gestural choices are quite unconventional. For example, consider Brian Williams’ stiff and formal posture during his first newscast [(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZaxd4nBeHM&feature=related)]. Couric’s unconventional gestures—along with her constant smile—were an attempt to be more personable than other anchors. Yet, these choices didn't fly with viewers who expected something more serious for nightly news. Incidentally, Couric did not do well in TV ratings, and in 2011 announced she was leaving after five short years at CBS News.

**To Do**

Visit [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), pull down the “Photos & Video” tab, and click on “Video” (notice the red arrow in Figure 1.6). This will bring you to the most recent videotaped speeches and events by the President. Choose one that interests you, and notice how the President uses the gestural mode in order to support his points. Pay particular attention to his hand gestures and facial expressions. Do you find his use of the gestural mode effective? Why or why not?

![Figure 1.6 (http://www.whitehouse.gov)](http://www.whitehouse.gov)
The Affordances of Multimodality

Each of the five modes described above has individual strengths and weaknesses for communication. This is what we call affordances. Each mode affords us different opportunities for communicating ideas. We’ve all heard the expression that a picture is worth a thousand words. Sometimes it is much easier and more effective to provide an image to show how to do something or how someone is feeling. Illustration and emotion are two affordances of images. At other times, when we are trying to explain why an idea is important, words may work best because they can be more precise and descriptive. Precision and description are two affordances of written text. And in other situations where we are trying to communicate how something should be done, it can be more expedient to create an animation or video that demonstrates the steps in a process while also explaining in audio how to proceed. Being able to combine showing and telling (to demonstrate a process, for instance) is an affordance of video. In each of these cases, writers can choose what kind of text to produce, depending on their purpose and based on the affordances—the advantages and disadvantages of the communication tools—at their disposal. (We’ll talk more about purpose in Chapter 2.)

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SIDEBAR

Modal Affordances

Modal affordances depend in large part on how the mode is used and in what context. Still, there are certain affordances that modes tend to carry with them.

- linguistic = linear explanation, precision, logical connections, specificity
- visual = empathy, emotion, comparison
- aural = tone, setting, emotion
- spatial = visual relationships between objects, people, environments
- gestural = physical immediacy, attitude, reader-interest based on movements by author and/or text

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It is important to note that while individual modes have their own affordances, these strengths and weaknesses are dependent on and influenced by combining modes. For example, a website that combines text with images, gives attention to color scheme and navigation, and provides opportunities for the user to interact has far more potential for engaging users and conveying information than a static black and white printed page. The content may be similar, but which modes are utilized and how it is designed for the audience makes a huge difference in what readers take away from the experience. (We’ll talk more about how pieces are designed in Chapter 3.)
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Multimodality In Action: A Case Study
Although we’ve given you examples above of how each mode works on its own to communicate, we want to finish this chapter with an extended example of how they all work together in a single multimodal text. Throughout this example, we’re going to highlight some of the key concepts we want you to pay attention to.

The following maps were created by the U.S. government to communicate about nationwide economic recovery efforts. In the 1930s, the United States was suffering from a severe economic meltdown, known now as The Great Depression. To address the situation, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration, which put millions of Americans to work repairing and updating the U.S.’s infrastructure, including building highways and fixing streets. The “WPA Street Projects” map in Figure 1.7 shows a state-by-state and county-by-county textual and visual overview of street projects funded by the government.

Figure 1.7: This map, printed in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration government recovery program, is a multimodal text.

The words (the linguistic mode) on this map give us a context for interpreting the data. They literally tell us what we are looking at. The map, with its shaded areas, visually represents locations where at least one project has taken place. Here, the color-coded visual shows us what areas received the most assistance. It also helps us make visual and spatial comparisons between locations. For example, the dense shaded area in the Northeast where population was largest at the time can be compared against the relatively barren spots in the West where fewer people lived. A spatial representation of the states from 1936, when there were only 48 states, will be different from an 1803 map that focuses on the Louisiana Purchase or a 2011 map with 50 states. So, in this 1936 map, the
linguistic, visual, and spatial modes work together to show readers where street projects occurred, given the historical context.

Now consider how this map could have been read differently if the proportion of words and numbers (linguistic modes) compared to visual and spatial information had been changed to favor the linguistic elements. For instance, what if, instead of the street projects map, readers only got large tables of data for each state, county, or project? (In fact, other parts of the WPA report from which the map is taken does include lots of these tables of data.) Linguistic modes often afford readers specificity, exactness, and logical connections, but this can slow readers down as they work to make sense of the information. The visual, on the other hand, often can’t be as detailed. We don’t know from the map, for example, how many projects were completed in each area. But the visual can allow readers to make quick comparisons from complex information—this ability for quick comparison is considered an affordance of the mode.

We also have to consider the affordances of the media available at the time of distribution. Media, or the singular medium, refer to the way a mode of communication reaches, or is distributed, to readers. In 1936, radio or print (typically government reports or newspapers) would have been the primary media used to communicate to the public. Printing in color would have been prohibitively expensive, so black-and-white visuals and written text had to be used. In Figure 1.8 we can see a more modern version of a similar report, which shows a map from the Recovery.gov website illustrating economic recovery in the U.S. in 2009-2010. Like FDR during the Works Progress Administration, President Obama created the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to stimulate job creation and repairs to the U.S. infrastructure during difficult economic times.

Figure 1.8: An interactive map from the 2010 Recovery.gov website; another example of a multimodal text.
This is the contemporary version of the 1936 WPA report, except this 2010 map appears on a website and is interactive (as the mouse hand and the pop-up about New Mexico shows). It uses linguistic, visual, and spatial modes of communication, just like the 1936 map does, but includes a robust color-coded system and interactivity (a gestural mode). There’s a lot more information on this map because of the affordances of the Web (such as cheaper use of multiple colors and the use of interactivity) which a printed map in 1936 would not have allowed. These differences in affordances don’t meant that the Web is better than print, just that due to the technological changes in the last century, the Web allows for more complex and detailed information to be conveyed using a similarly sized map.

Multimodality as a Tool in Writing
The maps in the above examples highlight at least four different modes of communication being used in one text (linguistic, spatial, gestural, visual). Other texts such as video interviews on the Recovery.gov website combine all five modes, including audio. Every text is multimodal, and you can think of the different modes of communication as a set of tools. You may not use all of them for a single project because each mode has particular affordances in specific situations—just as a wrench is more useful to fix a faucet than a hammer. Like the tools in a toolbox, though, you can sometimes use modes in ways they weren’t intended but that get the job done just as well (like using a screwdriver to pry open a can of paint).

As the above examples show, all kinds of texts are multimodal, and they work in a variety of ways depending on a LOT of different factors, including
what an author needs to communicate,
who she is trying to reach,
why she needs to communicate,
whether she knows about and could recreate similar texts (genres) that were successfully used in similar, previous situations,
whether she wants to, or can, change the genre previously used to better meet her current needs,
how she uses certain modes, media, and technologies to recreate or modify the genre,
when and where the communication needs to take place,
how she anticipates the current audience will react to similarities and changes in the genre,
what role she plays in the communication situation,
how that role shapes her ability to meet or break genre conventions,

among many other factors, which we’ll describe in more detail in the rest of this book. The point is that composing multimodally is complicated and contingent on a lot of factors—just like any writing situation.

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SIDEBAR
Multimodal texts don’t have to be digital. The 1936 WPA map above was not digital, nor is this science poster on suburban bird habitat (shrunk to show the whole thing). While it was created on a computer, it is printed and mounted to show in an offline format at a conference poster session.

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Conclusion
Together, the many modes that make up texts offer different affordances that are useful in different situations. Multimodality plays an important role because it gives writers additional means of designing a text to be more effective. This is particularly true when writers are trying to create a single text that will attend to the interests of a large, diverse group of readers. By understanding who readers are, what they need to know, and how they will use the information, authors can create texts that satisfy a specific rhetorical situation, a concept we will cover in Chapter 2.

ASSIGNMENT: Describing multimodality in everyday texts
To get a better sense of how prevalent multimodality is in all texts, spend the next few days going about your daily schedule collecting examples of multimodal texts. Maybe you can keep a blog where you upload, link to, or describe these texts, or start a Twitter hashtag where you can briefly describe what modes the texts use. Count the number of texts that use all five modes of communication (linguistic, aural, visual, spatial, gestural) and see what patterns you can discover across them. Are they similar types of texts? Do they come from a similar time period or location or publication? What are the two most different texts you found? How are the modes used, and does that contribute to how different the two are?