Chapter 2: Analyzing Multimodal Projects

Have you ever walked through town when a flyer, among the hundreds of other flyers you see every day, stands out so much that you can’t help but stop and read it? Have you ever been rushing to leave the house when your favorite song starts playing on the radio and you have to listen to it before you can leave? Have you ever “shared” a website link or online video with your Facebook friends? These multimodal texts are captivating—they capture your attention and encourage you to interact with and share them. These are the kinds of texts we want you to build.

Chances are, your reaction has to do with how well the multimodal text employs effective design choices. Authors have to choose from among a wide variety of options to create a text that is successful in conveying its purpose to a particular audience in a specific time, place, and context. All of these factors make up the rhetorical situation—a concept we describe in this chapter. You will also learn how to rhetorically analyze a multimodal text to discover how effective design choices are made. This sample analysis will help provide a framework you can use not just for the analysis of projects, but also for the creation of your own multimodal texts (a task we’ll take on in Chapter 3).

While in Chapter 1 we described the individual communicative modes (linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, or spatial) and multimodality (when two or more of the modes come together), in this chapter we focus less on individual modes and more on the overall rhetorical effects of various multimodal choices. If you don’t quite know yet what this means, by the end of the chapter you will.

Rhetoric and Multimodality

Those of us who study rhetoric today generally define it as any kind of multimodal communication used to make change in a particular situation. This change is often about persuading others to take action in favor of the author’s viewpoint, such as when an advertisement tries to persuade us to choose a political candidate, a new summer outfit, a different brand of toothpaste, a recycling option, or a party to attend. Sometimes this change is more subtle and the action is less explicit, such as when we read a novel to better understand the human condition (or simply to relax), or—as in the Recovery.gov example in the previous chapter—when we explore a government website to learn more about how our taxes are spent and who benefits.

As readers, we can choose whether to act based on how effectively a text persuades us. Our reactions typically depend on how well an author is able to address the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation refers to the set of social, cultural, and historical circumstances that an author draws on to create a text that encourages a specific action by the audience. In other words, authors have to pay attention to their intended audience, to their purpose for communicating, and to the context in which their text will be read if they want their audience to respond in a desired way.

Since the rhetorical situation applies to multimodal texts just as much as it does to word-based texts, let’s think about a musical example. When a song comes on the radio, the musician probably hopes that you’ll listen and buy their song. Whether you do depends on a lot of things: whether you like the song’s lyrics, if the song speaks to you in some way, whether you have the money, what format the song is available in, what hardware you have for listening to the song, etc. All of these concerns are ones that an author had to think through when creating and
distributing the song—this is the author’s rhetorical situation, the outcome of which is a text that asks readers to make a choice. Your choice may be to do nothing (to not listen to or buy the song), but that’s still a choice.

Rhetorical Analysis

In order to better understand the situation in which an author composed a text, and to help better understand a text’s meaning so as to make judgments about its effectiveness, we turn to rhetorical analysis. A rhetorical analysis is a method of describing the context in which an author wants to communicate his/her purpose or call for action to the intended audience in a textual genre. Below, we offer the five areas to address—context, author, purpose, audience, and genre—and offer some questions to consider when performing a rhetorical analysis.

Context

Context can be quite broad. When analyzing context, consider

- the medium (a website, flyer, speech, video game, song, brochure, etc.),
- the publication venue (book, newspaper, the Web, etc.),
- the historical conventions of the time (what materials, media, publishing venues are available? What are the current genre conventions for a particular kind of text in a certain year or decade?),
- the social and cultural conventions for the group and its genre (e.g., what colors, pictures, or phrases are appropriate in a particular community? What technologies do they have readily available?), and
- the bodily interaction and location of readers with the text (will they read it on their handheld while walking down the street? on a desktop computer in a public library? on a laptop in their backyard?).

Author

Sometimes authorship will be quite clear—say in the case of a signed letter to the editor—whereas other times you have to make an informed guess and rely on the implied author. Consider, for example, a Starbucks newspaper advertisement. A team of graphic designers (the actual author) composed it, yet the audience assumes Starbucks (the implied author) is the one sending the message. There are other texts, like a flyer for a concert, where you will likely have no idea who the actual author is, but you can probably say a lot about the implied author based on the design of the text.

When analyzing authorship, consider

- How does the author (implied or actual) establish personal credibility? Do you trust this source? Does it matter?
- How does the author (implied or actual) come across?
- Does the author (implied or actual) have a certain reputation? Does the text work to support this reputation? Or does it work to alter this reputation?
- If you know who the actual author is, can you find any historical-biographical information about him or her in order to understand credibility, character, and reputation?
Purpose
Describing a text’s purpose may sound somewhat simplistic, yet it is important to consider a range of possible intentions, for while there may be a large-scale purpose there are often secondary purposes. For example, a billboard for a local steakhouse has the primary purpose of attracting new clientele, but it may have the secondary purpose of solidifying current clientele’s opinion of the restaurant as a fun-loving family establishment.
  When analyzing purpose, consider
  ● What is the overall intention for the text? Why do we think so?
  ● Might there be one or more secondary intentions? What leads us to this conclusion?

Audience
The audience is the intended readership for a text. There may be more than one intended audience, and there may also be more than one actual audience. Consider a pop-country song heard on the radio at the mall. The songwriter’s intended audience is likely pop-country fans, and her secondary audience may be country or pop-music fans. Yet, in this context, the actual audience is anyone who happens to hear it.
  In a rhetorical analysis, your job is to pay attention to the intended primary and secondary audience. While it is not necessarily your job, it can sometimes illuminating to consider how the text will function if read by those outside the intended audience.
  When analyzing audience, consider
  ● Who is the intended audience?
  ● Who might be the secondary audience(s)?
  ● What values or opinions does the primary and secondary audience hold? Does the author appeal to these values or opinions in any way?

Genre
Genre is a term that has changed meaning for writers and researchers in the last decade or so. It has traditionally referred to static categories of texts in broad terms (sometimes related to the medium of a text), such as a newspaper, album, or movie, or in more specific terms that further categorize a text, such as when referring to movies by their designation as a horror, romantic comedy, or drama. Broadly speaking, audiences expect something from newspapers that they do not expect from movies. More narrowly, audiences expect something from horror movies that they do not expect from romantic comedies. This traditional understanding of genre helps us recognize how to group similar texts and understand their communicative purpose.
  However, genres aren’t just static categories; they also help shape communication practices within communities and social situations. In other words, genres can morph according to the local culture, historical time period, who is authoring the text, who is reading the text, and many other influences (as the government maps in Chapter 1 hinted at). Because genres are dynamic, readers need guides that will help them interpret the text. Thankfully, most genres have formal features that tend to remain the same between each use, as we demonstrate later in this chapter when we show how the WSU website has changed over time. These features are the genre conventions, or audience expectations, in the text. Genre helps us recognize how to group similar texts and understand their communicative purpose. (We’ll talk more about genre and genre conventions in Chapter 3).
  When analyzing genre, consider
How might we define the genre of this text? Consider both a broad definition and a more specific definition.

In what ways is this text similar to other texts within this genre?

What key features make it part of the genre you’ve identified?

It is important when asking these questions about a text to understand that you may never fully know everything there is to know about the author’s intended purpose or audience. Additionally, there isn’t always (or ever) a “right” answer when analyzing a text. What we can do is learn how to analyze texts so that we can better guess—hypothesize, or even create a theory about—how a text works and why.

Now that we’ve described the types of questions one should consider when performing a rhetorical analysis, we’re now going to put these terms to action. Through analyzing the Washington State University website homepage, you will see how a rhetorical analysis can help us see how particular design choices are made in particular situations.

Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation: A Case Study

The Washington State University website that we’re analyzing in this section is from 2010. We’re going to focus on the home page, represented in the screenshot in Figure 2.1. Our goal is to figure out what types of design choices were used by the author in order to effectively convey the purpose to the audience. In order to do this well, we also need to understand a bit about the genre and context for this particular text.

Figure 2.1: The front page (in October 2010) of the Washington State University website.
The genre of a university website has been around for 15 years (as of early 2011) and generally features links to information about a university’s academic and athletic programs, admissions and financial aid, its students and faculty, and the town in which the school is located, among other information. The genre of a university homepage is tied closely to its purpose. That is, its purpose is generally recognized (as WSU’s is) as a unified portal, or directory, to the rest of the university’s content that may be scattered across hundreds of internal sites. Additionally, along with serving as a portal, the genre of the University website also functions to brand the University in a positive light. If you look at University websites across the country, they all tend to 1) serve as a portal, and 2) attempt to put their best face forward for the general public. Within the genre of University websites, these two purposes tend to hold true.

The website Design Shack did a study of 50 U.S.-based university homepages from 2010 and concluded that the majority of homepages use the same, ineffective design because they try to cram too much information into too little space. (In comparison, WSU’s website topped the “Honor Roll” of best designs.) Consider this comical view of a university website’s purpose in Figure 2.2. This comic makes a valid point about how website design often competes with the site’s purpose and the audience’s genre expectations.

![Figure 2.2: Competing purposes and expectations in university website design.](http://imgs.xkcd.com/comics/university_website.png)

Along with purpose being related to genre, context is also intricately tied up with genre conventions. This particular version of the website, which was created in 2010, is intended for viewing on a desktop or laptop computer. This genre convention—designing for larger screens—will likely change the more everyday users access the Web via handheld devices. For instance, consider how the very first Washington State University website looked in 1997 (Fig 2.3). At the time, handheld devices barely existed and web design principles were still in their infancy. There were particular design conventions that are no longer commonplace, such as the multiple, competing points of emphasis on the page (primarily by using too much crimson, which is a color that culturally draws our attention). Compare this with the redesigned site from 2000 (Fig 2.4). Contextually speaking, how do the 1997, 2000, and 2010 sites differ? Each of those sites looked good for the time, and many university websites used similar designs in their histories.
This is why analyzing a genre within its historical and technological context is important—as our genre expectations change, so do the effectiveness of the designs.

In addition, technical communication scholar Barry Thatcher has pointed out that the purpose and genre conventions employed by international university website designers can differ significantly from our U.S. expectations. That is, the cultural context of a multimodal text can have a big impact on how we analyze it. For example, in the left sidebar of Figure 2.3, there’s a photo of a woman smiling directly at the audience. In countries that value groups over individuals, this photo would go against social customs and could be considered rude or even threatening. This example is a good reminder that what we take for granted as a customary genre or genre convention in the U.S. (or certain parts of it), does not mean that the same genres or conventions hold across all cultures, social settings, time periods, etc. We can only analyze the WSU website in relation to its unique rhetorical situation which has a unique combination of these contexts.

Figure 2.3: 1997 version

When it comes to the author, it is more useful to speak of the implied author (WSU) rather than the actual author (probably a person or group of people in Web or Information Technology services on campus). Because the purpose of the page is to present a single, informational view of WSU, no one person’s name (or group of names) is listed on this page. The audience is the intended readership: people interested in WSU, including current or potential students, parents, alumni, faculty and staff, or donors. A good designer would try to think of all the different reasons one might come to the WSU homepage and then try to design for these various users.

TO DO:
The XKCD comic in Figure 2.2 is funny because it’s often true. First, look at the “things people go to the site looking for” list. Do you agree with this list? Why or why not? Second, visit a university website homepage and see if it follows the patterns listed in this comic. If so, why do you think this is the case? If not, what differences do you see and how do you think they matter when it comes to the purpose and audience for this university’s homepage?

Analyzing Design Choices: A Case Study

Now that we know the rhetorical situation of the WSU website—that is, the author, audience, purpose, genre, and context—we’re going to see how the author’s design choices support the rhetorical situation. Every author chooses a genre and designs a text based on her perceived
understanding of the text’s purpose, the text’s audience, and the context within which the text will circulate.

In order to look more closely at the types of choices a designer makes, we’re going to start with five key design concepts: emphasis, contrast, organization, alignment, and proximity. These terms aren’t the only ones you could use to talk about choices—you may come up with some on your own or in your class—but to give you a start, we describe how these five design concepts are enacted through a variety of design choices. We call your attention to how these choices connect with the rhetorical situation as described above, and we ask you think about how such choices are, or are not, effective in this particular rhetorical situation.

Figure 2.5

(NOKE repeated from Figure 2.1 for ease of use.)

**Emphasis**

For speech or writing, emphasis means putting stress on a word or a group of words to give them more importance. In visual texts, it means the same thing; emphasis gives certain elements greater importance, significance, or stress than other elements in the text, which can guide your reading of the text as a whole.

The three centered photos are given primary visual emphasis on this page, that is, simply, they stand out. By emphasizing something bright, colorful, and positive (a smiling man, a picturesque wheat field, and the marching band) the author portrays a feeling of a happy and productive environment where people are filled with school spirit. Given that one of the purposes of the homepage is to positively brand the University, this use of emphasis is an effective design choice.

**To Do**

- While the photos are clearly the most emphasized design element on the WSU homepage, are there other elements you feel are emphasized (perhaps to a lesser degree)? If so, what are they and do they help support the purpose of the text?
- Visit your University homepage. What elements are the most emphasized? Why do you think this is?
Constrast
Contrast is the difference between elements so that the combination of those elements makes one element stand out from another. Contrast can be determined by comparing elements in a text. Color, size, placement, shape, and content can all be used to create contrast in a text. Contrast plays a large role in emphasis, in that often the most contrasted element appears the most emphasized.

Notice how this webpage takes advantage of white space—a design technique that employs contrast in subtle ways, using more of the background of the page (which is usually not filled with elements other than a background color or graphic) to make everything else on the page “pop.” Thus, the page is not too busy, and the audience can easily find what they’re looking for, be it donors looking for ways to give to WSU, students looking for a professor’s email address, or parents of potential students looking to learn more about the school’s reputation. Additionally, because the color crimson is contrasted against the plain light-colored background, the audience will likely be attracted to the crimson-colored elements. Notice how, if you follow the crimson, your eye goes from the top row to the logo to the icons in the photo bar down to the “Give to WSU” link in the bottom right. This contrast in color allows the crimson to play a large role in how the audience moves through the page.

To Do
● As described above, color plays a large role in contrast. Yet, the size of the elements on the page also play a role. How do you see size used to create contrast on this page?
● Visit your University homepage. What kind of contrast do you see? Does this use of contrast seem effective? Why or why not?
Organization
Organization is the way in which elements are arranged to form a coherent unit or functioning whole. You can talk about organizations of people, which put people into categories depending on their job title and department, or organizing your clothes, which might involve sorting by color and type of garment. You can also talk about organizing an essay, which involves arranging your ideas so as to make the strongest argument possible. Or, in this case, you can talk about organizing the multimodal elements of a website to support the purpose of the text.

This page is organized into four rows of information. The first row includes the crimson-colored rectangle that includes an index and a search bar. The second row includes the WSU logo, the various campus links, and quick links. The third row, the one most emphasized, includes the pictures and the main topic links (About, Admission, Academics, Research, Services, and WSU Life). The final row includes a “News” link along with links specific to particular audiences (Future Students, Parents, Alumni/Friends, Current Students, Faculty/Staff).

If we consider the purpose of this website as well as the audience, this organization appears to be effective. First, when it comes to positively branding the University, consider how one of the first groupings of words we see when reading from top-to-bottom and left-to-right on the screen is the university name and motto (“Washington State University: World Class. Face to Face.”). These words help to craft a particular identity for WSU as a university that offers high quality education in a personalized setting. Second, when it comes to serving as a portal for a range of potential audiences, the four-row organizational structure offers many entry points for a user looking for specific information.

To Do
- What role does color play in helping organize the information on this site? Do you think this use of color is an effective design choice?
- Visit your University homepage. Look at the way the design elements are organized. Do you find these choices to be effective? Why or why not?
Alignment

Alignment means, literally, how things line up. A composition that uses alignment to best effect controls how our eyes move across a text. Even if we're working with a text that is all words, every piece should be deliberately placed. A centered alignment—an easy and popular choice—causes our eyes to move around the space with less determination, as we move from the end of one line and search for the beginning of the next. A justified alignment stretches the content so it is evenly distributed across a row, thus the left and right margins remain consistent. This is a popular choice for newspapers in that it can make a large amount of text appear neat and orderly. A strong left alignment gives us something to follow visually—even elements that contrast in size can demonstrate coherence through a single alignment. A strong right alignment creates a hard edge that connects disparate elements. It can be useful to group things in a clear, interesting way.

Remember that we described this page as organized into four rows. Notice how each row aligns with the others. The top crimson-colored row runs from the left to the right margin, yet the linguistic content of this row is right-aligned. The remaining three rows are justified aligned and run from the left margin of the photo bar to the right margin of the photo bar. The only exception is the sub row of links center aligned beneath the photos, yet because they are encased in the photo row itself (notice the white rectangle that includes both the pictures and this row of links), they appear cohesive. By keeping a justified alignment, the page feels clean, crisp, and easy to use—something that is important for an audience looking for easy-to-find information.

To Do

- Why do you think the linguistic content of the top row is left aligned? How might this help support the purpose and audience, or does it?
- Visit your University homepage. What kind of alignments do you see? Do you find these choices to be effective? Why or why not?
Proximity

Proximity means closeness in space. In a visual text, it refers to how close elements, or groupings of elements, are placed to each other and what relationships are built as a result of that spacing. The relationships created by the spacing between elements help readers understand the text, in part because readers might already be familiar with similar designs of other texts (this audience recognition of similar texts is called genre knowledge). Proximity can apply to any kind of element in a visual text, including words and images, or to elements of an audio text, such as repeating rhythms or the verses and chorus.

As described in the Organization analysis, there are four major groups of written links found in this homepage—first, the index, contact us, and search bar at the very top; second, the campus listings at the top-middle; third, the main topic links under the pictures; and fourth, the links containing information specific to particular audiences of the page at the bottom-right. Within each group, the words’ close proximity to one another suggests a close relationship, whereas the groups themselves are placed farther apart. If an audience member is looking for information specific to a campus, or specific to an audience, it makes sense that the author chose to place these items in proximity to one another. This design choice helps to make the page usable.

To Do

- While the campus-specific and audience-specific links make good sense to be in proximity to one another, why do you think the author chose to place individual inks underneath the photo in proximity to one another? (About, Admission, Academics, Research, Services, WSU Life)
- Visit your University homepage. Pay attention to the links and to the visuals used. How is proximity used? Does this use of proximity seem effective? Why or why not?
Conclusion

In this chapter, we’ve used rhetorical analysis to figure out why a text was designed for a particular rhetorical situation and how that text works based on the author’s design choices. We can sometimes guess what the rhetorical situation is for a text (based on our experiences with other, similar genres). Examining design choices can often help us learn more about the rhetorical situation. Were you to look at other university websites, you would find similar design choices made to respond to similar rhetorical situations. However, don’t be surprised if analyzing a text’s design causes you to go back and say more about the audience, purpose, context, and genre. Doing a rhetorical analysis isn’t always a linear or formal process, as the WSU case study shows—there’s lots more we could have written about the design choices or the rhetorical situation.

Keep in mind that using rhetorical analysis to understand a text may result in a favorable opinion of a text, but it may also illuminate various problems—it may help explain why a text has that “wow” factor, or it may explain why it doesn’t. Consider, for instance, if instead of providing a few welcoming photos and easy-to-find links, the WSU webpage were designed like an essay in a word-processing document. That kind of design primarily uses the linguistic mode of communication (although it also uses visual and spatial modes to a small extent; usually not consciously). This primarily linguistic mode of design would be appropriate for an essay but would not be appropriate for the genre expectations of a website and, because of this, would most likely be seen as a failure. Successful texts involve paying close attention to the rhetorical situation (which includes genre conventions, which we’ll talk about in the next chapter) and choosing design elements that the situation demands.

ASSIGNMENT: Rhetorical Analysis of Multimodal Texts

Rhetorical analyses can result in texts of their own (such as papers, presentations, or multimodal projects), but they can also function as research for your own projects. If you can analyze how a text works, you can often apply that understanding to the design of your own text.

1. Find three examples of multimodal texts that come from similar genres (e.g., university websites, talking cat videos, newspaper ads). Perform a rhetorical analysis of the text, whereby you describe the text’s author, purpose, audience, genre and context and explain how different design choices are used to meet the demands of the rhetorical situation. When describing design choices, begin with the terms from this chapter: emphasis, contrast, organization, alignment, and proximity. However, you may realize other terms are necessary in order to fully describe the text.

2. Next, consider how the author’s choice of medium affords certain opportunities that another medium (or media) would not.

3. How would you redesign one of these texts into a different medium to convey a similar purpose? Is it possible? How does the rhetorical situation change? Is the text as effective as the original? Why or why not?