Chapter 3: “Researching Multimodal Genres”

As the analyses in Chapter 2 showed, an author needs to be able to understand the rhetorical situation in which she or he will produce a text and decide what design choices to make across modes of communication so that the purpose of the text meets the audience’s needs. To create a multimodal project, you need to decide

- who your audience is,
- what purpose your multimodal project will serve,
- what action you want audiences to take after interacting with your text,
- what context(s) your text will be read within,
- what genre(s) your text should be,
- what modes of communication will best fit your rhetorical situation, and
- what design choices you need to make in each mode you use.

This chapter builds from the idea that different communicative modes (linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial) have different strengths and weaknesses (affordances) in different rhetorical situations. We now ask you to pay attention to the what (content) and how (design) so you can apply it to your own multimodal project.

Getting Started: What and How

One of the best ways to begin thinking about a multimodal project is to see what has already been said about a topic you’re interested in (or have been assigned) as well as see how that topic has been designed by other authors. For instance, you might be interested in creating a text about how students use technology to enhance their learning experience. You’d need to know what’s already been said about that topic—an exploratory process that isn’t any different from what you’d do when writing a research paper. Researching your topic is the what part of the equation (e.g., what you want to say). (We’ll talk more about research for your multimodal project in Chapter 5).

While you’re researching your topic, you also need to explore how authors are presenting that topic. Every text is designed to accomplish a specific purpose to reach a specific audience—using combinations of communicative modes. That is the how—the multimodal, rhetorical design choices—that you also need to look for when researching your topic. Unless your teacher or boss has assigned you a specific genre to work within, you’ll want to research multiple genres in multiple media outlets—both academic (probably texts you’d find in your university library) and popular (texts you’d find on websites or in public bookstores, such as YouTube, trade magazines like Good Housekeeping or Wired, personal blogs, brochures in doctor’s office waiting rooms, ads on the sides of busses, etc.). Each of these publication locations use modes of communication differently depending on the rhetorical goals of the publisher and/or the author’s rhetorical situation.

When examining the how of your topic, you’ll need to ask yourself:
- How do other authors present on your topic?
- Which text seems to suit its rhetorical situation most effectively?

You can answer these questions by performing a rhetorical analysis on a sample set of texts about your topic, and then use that information to decide which kind of text you want to compose given your own rhetorical situation.
Researching the What & How: A Case Study

Keep in mind, however, that the what and the how—or what designers and rhetors often refer to as content (the what) and form (the how)—aren’t easily separable. While our use of these terms might give the illusion that it’s possible for an author to separate what she wants to say from how she will say it—or in a heavily multimodal text, what her topic is from what her design will be—it is not at all possible to separate the two. Writing is never done in isolation of the rhetorical situation, which includes the medium in which that writing is meant to be distributed.

For instance, even if you’re “just” posting a status update to Facebook, you have to consider what you will say, how you will say it given who will see it (your Friends: what their relationship is to you such as parents, schoolmates, teachers, relatives, etc., what they know about you, and what you want them to know about you), the context (time of day, event about which you’re posting, etc.), and the fact that you only have a limited amount of characters to post your update. That last material constraint (as well as the other rhetorical considerations) imposes a limit to the design choices you make as you craft that status update. In this way, what you say cannot be divorced from how you say it. It’s the same with all multimodal texts.

Let’s look at an example to see more clearly how content and form are dependent upon one another and dependent upon the rhetorical situation. If we wanted to produce a multimodal text about how video games affect learning, we might search in library databases for scholarly books and articles that contain peer-reviewed research about that topic as well as on the public Web (not just in library databases… maybe through a Google search, including checking out the Image and Video search options). Having done this, we’ve found two examples we want to read to find out what the authors have said about video games and learning:

1. a scholarly book called *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Literacy and Learning* by James Gee. Gee argues, drawing on lots of other scholarly research, that video games help promote literacy because they offer complicated, interactive narratives that game players have to learn to navigate.

2. a Prezi (an interactive, online, multimedia presentation application) called “Playing to Learn” by Maria Andersen, in which she argues that using games in the classroom is an effective teaching tool because it engages students’ brains in different ways that keep them interested in learning tough topics (like math, which she teaches).

So, the what is that these two scholar-teachers (as their bios on each text tell us) agree that games are good pedagogical tools. And they give lots of scholarly and popular examples as to why games are good for us. In making our own project, we could cite either of these texts to support our own argument about games. That’s something you do in most of your writing classes already, so we want to focus on how each of these authors make their arguments.

Gee, on the one hand, has written a scholarly book, although as far as scholarly books go, his is written in a style that’s easier to read than most. (We think his purpose is to reach an audience of public readers who are interested in games and reading practices, in addition to academics who might study literacy and gaming.) But he still relies on the genre conventions of scholarly books (e.g., prose, citations, etc.) to connect with his audience. There are visual modes used in his book—a few tables—but it’s mostly words formatted in a way that we’re used to seeing in scholarly (or even popular) books. In other words, his book looks like pretty much every other book in that genre (see Figure 3.1)
Andersen, on the other hand, has chosen to present the same topic using a much different design: a media-rich, interactive Prezi on the website prezi.com. She also includes citations and examples, just like Gee does, although they are usually much more brief because of the design conventions afforded by the Prezi interface. (We’ll talk more about how technological choices impact how you can design your multimodal projects in Chapter 5.) However, unlike Gee, Andersen makes her argument about how games promote learning by designing her text to look like a game (see Figure 3.2), which adds visual, spatial, and gestural meaning to her linguistic text. Readers interpret these modes differently, and in Andersen’s case, it means she doesn’t have to present as much linear, written information as Gee does to get a similar point across because she has the visual, spatial, and gestural design of the text do some of that work better than the linguistic could do. Thus, how Gee and Andersen present their topics is as important as much as what they want readers to get from their texts.

We recognize, of course, that Gee’s book is written for a slightly different audience and purpose than Andersen’s Prezi, so it’s not surprising that her highly mediated piece is a lot different in presentation than Gee’s book. As we mentioned earlier, Gee’s purpose is to reach an audience of public readers who are interested in games and reading practices, in addition to academics who might study literacy and gaming. Anderson’s purpose is to convince other teachers that using games in the classroom is an effective teaching tool because it engages students’ brains in different ways that keep them interested in learning tough topics. One text is not better than the other, in this case, because they both serve different rhetorical situations. By rhetorically analyzing both of these texts, you can discover some of these differences.

TO DO:
Given the rhetorical situation for Gee and Anderson’s texts, why do you think they chose to use the modes that they did? Do you think Anderson could have effectively made her point through a scholarly written article? Do you think Gee would have been more successful if he used an interactive visual mode instead of the book?
Figure 3.2: Maria Andersen’s Prezi about using games to teach effectively. (http://prezi.com/rj_b-gw3u8x6/).

Looks like a game, eh?
ASSIGNMENT: Researching Your Project Idea

To narrow your topic idea and think about ways to design your multimodal project, try the following exercise:

1. Find and read 8–10 texts on your topic, across a range of media.
2. List the arguments, points, or key ideas those texts say about your topic. (This is the what. For instance, in the examples above, both authors chose to focus on how teaching games improve students’ learning. That’s a key idea within the topic of games.)
3. Next, list the genres, modes, and multimodal design choices (think back to the list in Chapter 2: emphasis, contrast, organization, alignment, and proximity) that the texts use. (This is the how.)
4. Analyze the what in relation to the how (using rhetorical analysis—context, author, purpose, audience, and genre) and decide which texts seem the most successful given their rhetorical situations.
5. Which themes in those successful texts are most interesting to you and that you’d like to research further. (If a key idea seems to be missing from the list, that might also be a good place to do more research and design your project around.) Shorten your list of themes down to 1-2 ideas.

You now have several new pieces of information to help you start building your own multimodal project: a suitable topic or theme; an annotated list of texts that you can potentially cite within, or that at least will inform the purpose of, your project; and a list of multimodal texts that were successful in other rhetorical situations, which you could use as models when choosing your own project design.

Then, one final thing we have to do before you start designing is to take a closer look at how authors know to choose particular kinds of texts, or genres, to work with in particular rhetorical situations. Because we don’t know what the rhetorical situation of your multimodal project assignment is, we’re approaching this discussion by focusing on how you can learn to analyze the genres of multimodal texts and to figure out how genre conventions work within specific sets of genres. By learning to analyze the conventions of multimodal genres, you can apply that analytical skill to any new kind of text you come across, which will add more design choices to your rhetorical knowledge every time you compose a new text for a new rhetorical situation.

Genre Conventions

Based on your exploration of the topic above (in the assignment), you may have noticed that some of the texts used similar design choices in similar rhetorical situations. These are genre conventions that authors and readers use to make meaning within a rhetorical situation. For example, if you analyzed breast cancer pamphlets and found that they all used a pink ribbon and a script-like font, this is probably a genre convention. Or, if you analyzed instruction sets for building a robotic coffee maker, and found that they all used large, emphasized, left-aligned headers, this is probably a genre convention. It’s important to analyze how these conventions are used within texts because genre conventions are a good starting place when designing a similar text for a similar rhetorical situation. They help us to understand what audiences expect from particular kinds of texts in particular kinds of situations. For example, if you’re making a breast cancer awareness brochure, do you need to use the pink ribbon in order to be taken seriously? Or are there good reasons to break with this genre convention?
You’re probably innately familiar with genre conventions of brochures (3-fold, scattered with large images, some writing, etc.). You’re probably even more familiar with the genre conventions of texts that are mostly linguistic in their designs such as an academic paper that uses a 12-point, serif font and has one-inch margins, or a novel that uses smaller line heights than an academic paper and different margins to accommodate printing. Some of these conventions may be new to you (or you’ve just never thought about them before), but we’re not going to talk much about linguistically-heavy genres because this book is about combining modes in more robust ways. So here’s a different example: Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are a genre of Web-based social networking technologies that prominently feature the status update as a genre convention. Without the convention (and conventional placement at the top of the page) of status updates, social networking sites would be harder to recognize as such. So even though Facebook and Twitter may not look much alike (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4), some overlap in interface conventions (status update location and prompt formed as a question) helps readers recognize a pattern between the two sites and expectations about what readers should do with those sites. Patterns like these help readers categorize texts into genres, in this case, the genre of social-networking sites.

![Facebook Screenshot](image)

**Figure 3.3:** Facebook screenshot, showing the “What's on your mind?” status update entry box in the middle of a person’s Profile page.
When researching texts for your multimodal project, you may come across a text whose genre is unclear. If you don’t know the genre of a text, remember that genres are created based on other genres, social circumstances, and rhetorical situations that we’re familiar with. That is, if you don’t know the genre, ask yourself what the text reminds you of. Then maybe ask a few of your friends and your teacher. Collectively, it’s likely that you’ll be able to determine a genre that most closely fits the kind you want to further study. Also, sometimes texts mash-up multiple genres. For example, when social-networking sites (like Twitter, for example) were first created, they asked users to “microblog” in 140 characters, instead of a blog post that could be much longer than that. The term “microblog” shows that status updates were compared most closely in genre to blogs when they were new. So, if you encounter a text whose genre is new to you, see what other genres it relates to and consider studying those as well.
SIDEBAR/SPREAD: Looking for genre patterns in three Prezis

To go along with this assignment, here’s how we might compare Andersen’s gaming Prezi with two other Prezis (Figures 3.5 and 3.6) about the same topic.

The Prezi software is based on our genre knowledge of other presentation tools (like Keynote and Powerpoint, which in turn is based on our knowledge of poster presentations), but Prezi is also significantly different from other presentation software in that it allows for readers to create zooming and animation features that are very difficult in other presentation tools, if possible at all. For instance, while its rare to run across a Powerpoint that you’re expected to interpret without any help from the author (e.g., notes posted online from a class lecture are still intended to go with the face-to-face class lecture), with Prezi it’s more likely to run across presentations that stand on their own. So that similarity across Prezis becomes one possible genre convention,
as noted in the table below (under Stands Alone?). The more stand-alone—at least in these three examples—the Prezi is, the more successful it seems to be.

There are many more conventions we could list in the table, but we’ll leave it at these, just to give you an idea of how to think about coming up with your own comparative list. For example, based on the number of Likes, we might be able to judge the success of these three Prezis, although that doesn’t do justice to some of the successful qualities within the two that have zero likes so far. However, the real reason in doing this kind of exercise is to figure out what genre conventions authors of Prezis have come to use and use successfully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prezis</th>
<th>Andersen’s “Playing to Learn”</th>
<th>Bush’s “Games Based Learning”</th>
<th>Maelia’s “Using Web-Based Games to Support 21st Century Learning”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background color</td>
<td>Black text on white background</td>
<td>White text on grey background</td>
<td>White text on grey background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigation</td>
<td>Next-button in Prezi</td>
<td>Next button in Prezi</td>
<td>Next-button in Prezi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of words</td>
<td>Uses titles, quotes, &amp; explanatory text</td>
<td>Uses titles and keywords only (not quotes or explanatory text)</td>
<td>Uses titles and explanatory text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels of zoom &amp; rotation</td>
<td>Zooms in on key elements, rotation follows board game path (see Path below)</td>
<td>Uses same level of zoom throughout &amp; no rotation/animation</td>
<td>Mostly uses same level of zoom throughout (a few variances), minimal rotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Bio &amp; contact info in Prezi</td>
<td>No information in Prezi</td>
<td>No information in Prezi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of images</td>
<td>Images supplement the written text</td>
<td>Images convey examples (appropriate for medium)</td>
<td>Very few images; mostly for shock value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of stopping points or “slides” on the path</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the text stand alone?</td>
<td>Works without author intervention (e.g., not really designed as a presentation); stands alone and audience can understand argument</td>
<td>Doesn’t work well without the author intervening (e.g., designed as a presentation to be given with the author present, talking readers through the key points)</td>
<td>Audiences will be able to understand the author’s point; stands alone, but not that interesting. Could work as stand-alone or author-presented work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use/purpose of navigational path</td>
<td>Path is designed around a background illustration that corresponds to the argument. Great “bigger picture” view.</td>
<td>Path seems random/not planned (there’s no “bigger picture” in the design of the path)</td>
<td>Path is based on mindmapping concept, but not all nodes are related. Some “bigger picture” purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citations</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No (but there is a resource list)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of course, if you are required to create a presentation for your multimodal project and you know that the rhetorical situation requires you to deliver it personally, perhaps your presentation will still be successful even if the Prezi doesn’t stand alone. You just have to figure out which conventions you still need to make the text interesting and useful for your audience. For instance, all of the Prezis here use the standard linear navigation path that allows readers to click the Next button to navigate to the next node of information, as opposed to skipping nodes or placing information outside of the path for readers to discover on their own. That kind of navigation would be more appropriate for readers to play with in a stand-alone piece than in a public presentation. And that’s a design decision you have to make based on your rhetorical situation.

ASSIGNMENT: Analyzing genre & genre conventions

In the previous assignment, we asked you to come up with a topic idea for your multimodal project. You also came up with a list of multimodal texts related to that topic that you thought were successful. In this assignment, you’ll build on that exercise to learn how to analyze genres and put that knowledge to work in your own project.

1. Go back to the list of successful multimodal texts you made in the previous Assignment, and pick one that you think best fulfills the author’s purposes for that rhetorical situation. Research to find 2–3 examples of that genre (they do not have to be on the same topic, although they might be).

2. Analyze the examples in this genre and make a list of similarities and differences. These might include design choices such as layout, navigation, multimodal elements, and what each of these choices accomplishes within the text. You can also list rhetorical choices such as audience, purpose, context, historical period, etc. Refer back to Chapter 2 for a sampling of rhetorical and design choices that you could use. Also, see the sidebar for one way to create this list.

3. What things are similar? Do they function or look similar across most of the examples? If so, you have a genre convention. Make a shortlist of all the conventions for that particular genre, which you should keep as a handy checklist when designing your own multimodal project in that same genre. (You’ll also use it later in this book.) Of course, if you end up choosing another genre to model, simply re-do this assignment with a new set of genre examples.
Pitching Your Project

Knowing how to perform rhetorical analyses and looking closely for genre conventions means you can figure out how to write or design any kind of text in any future writing situation. There is no single approach or kind of text that will work in all situations for all audiences. In this chapter, we learned how to take the rhetorical principles and design choices from Chapter 2 and apply them to analyzing multimodal genres in this chapter. In doing so, we took you one step further to designing your own multimodal text, where you present your project idea to show how the what and how (content/form) of the design might come together in the final product. By pitching your project idea to your teacher (or your boss, or your client), you can be better assured that you’re on the right track as you create a text for a particular rhetorical situation.

A pitch is a short presentation that gives all the pertinent information to a stakeholder as a means of convincing them you know what you’re talking about and can take on the project at hand. (Sometimes pitches are called elevator speeches, because they are sometimes given in elevators when you only have four floors to convince the publisher to accept your book proposal, for instance.) Once you have an idea approved in a pitch, you can start fleshing out the form and content of the project. In the next few chapters, then, we’ll offer some practical suggestions for pulling all the rhetorical, generic, multimodal, and technological parts of your project together. In the meantime, the next assignment asks you to prepare a pitch for your stakeholders, clients, or teacher.

ASSIGNMENT: The Pitch

Pitches are presentations to audience members who have some stake in what you are proposing. These stakeholders may be your teacher, your classmates, or external clients (e.g. people from the community or from an organization on campus). Different stakeholders generally care about different aspects of your project, so gathering input from a variety of stakeholders by pitching your early project ideas can give you a better sense of how to proceed. You and your teacher should discuss the details of this rhetorical situation (or they may ask you to analyze it yourself) before embarking on your pitch.

When designing your pitch, consider the following questions:

- What is the rhetorical situation of your pitch?
- What genre of pitch does it require (live presentation, stand-alone presentation, paper hand-outs, a formal written proposal)?
- What are the genre conventions you will use to pitch?

In relation to the above questions, you will need to consider including the following information:

- What is the rhetorical situation for your multimodal project (as opposed to your pitch)?
- What genre will you use for your project?
- What is your topic? How will you convey your topic to your pitch audience? How much do they need to know at this point in the project and what will you tell them to hook their interests? (How much more research do you need to do?)
- How will you design your project in relation to your topic? (What is your visual metaphor, etc.?) How is the design appropriate to your project’s rhetorical situation?
What do you need to know/learn to be able to complete your project? (in other words, how do you convince your teacher or client that you are able to complete this project in the given timeline for this multimodal assignment?)

Your teacher might have other requirements she wants you to include, such as a time limit, a specific technology to use, or a professional clothing requirement for that day. Your teacher might also discuss the purpose of the pitch for your particular class—to us, a pitch is not a contract; it’s more like you’re proposing a concept that you’re planning to explore and it may end up going in a slightly different direction as you work on it. Remember, at this point, you may not have completed a ton of research into the topic or designs, so there may be room for change. This is the same basic process we use when we write essays; as you research and write more on an essay topic, the topic might become more concrete, it might change direction, etc. In the case of multimodal projects, a change in topic or a refinement of your argument due to additional research might result in a rethinking of the project’s genre and design—it’s not as easy as cutting and pasting words into a different order anymore. So you should expect some level of contingency in your project idea as your work on it progresses.