A CROSS-TRAINING APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING: COMPOSING VISUAL ESSAYS IN THE SECONDARY LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

Kristen E. Werder, B.S.

Washington, D.C.
April 26, 2011
A CROSS-TRAINING APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING:
COMPOSING VISUAL ESSAYS IN THE SECONDARY LANGUAGE ARTS
CLASSROOM

Kristen E. Werder, B.S.

Thesis Advisor: Norma Tilden, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

My project considers how secondary Language Arts instructors can integrate visual composing experiences into their classrooms while meeting traditional writing goals. Although immersed in a visually rich environment outside of school, adolescents face a much different print-based environment at school. I seek to investigate the factors that perpetuate this divide and the possibilities and difficulties of bridging it in the secondary Language Arts classroom. My project will consider how an allegiance to traditional writing clashes with communicative needs of the 21st century, investigate the historical and cultural sources of image anxiety, and explore the potential that images have for engaging and supporting adolescent student writers. Borrowing the concept of cross-training from athletics and applying it to writing, this project conceives of visual essays as one multimodal production experience that can strengthen writing skills applicable also to traditional written assignments.
I wish to thank my family for their continued support throughout this process, and those friends who offered their time and advice.

I am also grateful to my thesis advisor, Professor Norma Tilden, for her constructive feedback and support.
Kristen E. Werder Table Of Contents

Introduction: From Writing to Composing and Back Again 1
Chapter One: Running with the Pack or Leading the Race: Teaching Communication in a Visual, Participatory Culture 7
Chapter Two: The War Between Pictures and Words: And How to End It 23
Chapter Three: Visual Essays as Cross-Training Exercises 37
Chapter Four: Composing a Visual Personal Essay 52
Appendix: Assignment Sheet 66
Bibliography 67
Introduction: From Writing to Composing and Back Again

Runners who aspire to improve their abilities often believe that the best way to run faster and further is simply to run more. Thinking that nothing could be better for improving running than, well, running, they continue day after day in the same pattern, sometimes to the exclusion of all other forms of exercise. Despite working harder, many runners find that rather than improve, their performances plateau or even drop. Beginners and even more experienced runners are often surprised to learn that a solution may not involve more running, but in fact a strategy that calls for less running: cross-training. This approach substitutes the primary sport—in this case, running—with an alternative form of exercise—such as swimming, cycling, or weightlifting—for a given amount of time in order to improve performance in the primary sport. My project seeks to investigate how secondary Language Arts instructors can borrow the concept of cross-training from athletics and apply it to writing.

Teachers who aspire to improve students’ writing abilities in a specific genre, such as the traditional five-paragraph essay, often focus exclusively on that genre. As messages assume an increasingly visual form outside of schools, however, my project will consider how an enduring devotion to this routine clashes with communicative needs of the 21st century, investigate the historical and cultural sources of image anxiety, and explore the potential that images have for engaging and supporting student writers in a secondary English Language Arts class. As visual communication theorists Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen explain, visual culture is altering communication: “The world told is a different world to the world shown” (Literacy in the New Media Age 1). But visuality is not the only factor changing communication. A variety of composition scholars also identify access to participation as transforming the development and
distribution of messages. These scholars, including Kress and van Leeuwen, composition scholars Bronwyn T. Williams and Mary E. Hocks, and communication and media scholar Henry Jenkins all recognize that the shift from print to screen positions producers and audiences differently. Technology has granted producers more freedom to choose among an array of tools and modes for creating their messages and more options for distributing them. Meanwhile, technology has also granted audiences greater accessibility in responding to those compositions. These scholars agree that composition classrooms must pay more attention to visuality and participation not only in teaching students to critique texts, but also in teaching textual production.

This project conceives of multimodal composing experiences as cross-training exercises that can strengthen writing skills also applicable to traditional assignments. More specifically, this project will explore the option to cross-train writers through teaching, assigning, and assessing visual essays in the Language Arts classroom. As an approachable, affordable, and accessible technology, cameras and their photographs offer a broad range of possibilities for cross-training writers. While digitally complex multimodal compositions may exceed the average classroom’s technological and institutional capabilities, my project aspires to reap the pedagogical benefits of cross-training writers through photography. A cross-training approach to teaching writing would occasionally substitute the primary genre—perhaps the five-paragraph written essay—with the multimodal visual essay or other alternative genre to teach critical thinking skills applicable to both genres.

Although many athletes and even coaches initially doubt the validity of cross-training, they soon discover its numerous physical and mental benefits. Rather than narrow an athlete’s workout to meet the exact physical demands of his or her primary sport, cross-training instead
broadens the athlete’s workout: alternative exercises diversify the muscle groups exerting effort, and thus strengthen muscles underdeveloped due to months of the same movements; distribute movement to less-stressed joints, and thus permit inflamed areas to recover; and direct the athlete’s mental energies toward fresh yet productive challenges, and thus avert mental burnout. When they return to their primary sport, many athletes find cross-training has not only enhanced their physical fitness, but also renewed their passion for their sport. This project proposes that writing teachers can occasionally substitute cross-training approaches to teaching writing into the secondary Language Arts classroom to improve students’ performances with academic writing.

***

Chapter One investigates the potentialities of visual communication in the writing classroom. Writing in the twenty-first century means more than black words printed on a white sheet of paper. As many scholars including Kathleen Blake Yancey and Kress and van Leeuwen point out, the technologies of this era have sparked new ways of communicating, modes that rely heavily on visual aspects and are highly participatory. As Yancey, former chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, points out in her 2004 conference keynote address, the emergence of media and technology has increased the gap between school-sponsored writing and all other forms of writing (“Made Not Only in Words” 297). Kress and van Leeuwen contend that while traditional written communication will likely remain the language of the academy and the elite, workplace readiness increasingly requires visual literacy (Reading Images 3). Yet, teachers’ efforts to bridge this gap by integrating visuality into the curriculum have garnered mixed results. Critics such as school improvement consultant Mike Schmoker and literary theorist Stanley Fish assert that teachers who invite students to explore these new visual means of communication contribute to what they see as declining literacy skills, citing crumbling
standards, falling standardized test scores, and under-prepared high school graduates. In an increasingly participatory and visual culture, how should schools respond? What skills should a 21st century definition of literacy encompass? What are its limits? If today’s students more actively engage with visuality in their literacy practices outside of school than did other generations, are these habits weaknesses that educators must correct, or strengths that educators must utilize? The first chapter will explore these questions.

Chapter Two anticipates the resistance that teachers should expect as they re-introduce visuality into the writing classroom’s agenda and offers insights regarding the conflicts between pictures and words. To approach this topic, I will rely on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, the ideas of media and art scholar W.J.T. Mitchell, and cartoonist and cartoon theorist Scott McCloud. Their works address the relationship between language and image to reveal how traditional attitudes, limited vocabulary, a fear of cultural decline, and the primacy of words upholds their reign. Following the model outlined by composition scholar Peter Elbow in “The War Between Reading and Writing,” I will investigate the possibility for mitigating the rivalry between pictures and words through a productive use of their tension. My project thus seeks to illuminate and explore ways Language Arts instructors might pursue more productive critiques of verbal and visual modes and ultimately, more successfully teach productive communication.

Chapter Three will frame multimodal composing experiences as cross-training exercises, focusing on how the visual essay can achieve traditional writing objectives. While secondary Language Arts teachers are increasingly—but cautiously—inviting visual texts such as photographs into their classrooms as objects of study in the name of addressing visual literacy, educators concerned with critical pedagogy assert that courses must also prepare students to participate in the production of such non-traditional, visual texts. Contesting the existence of
print monomodality, compositionist Stephen Bernhardt suggests that visual communication has long had a place in composition through attention to document design and that teachers should encourage attention to visual rhetoric. Critiquing an inventory of textbooks claiming visual emphasis, composition instructor Steven Westbrook explains their insufficiencies and why students need more opportunities to produce visual texts. Most recently, composition textbooks and journal articles have adopted heavier visual agendas, some even advocating for multimodal compositions in the classroom—products that invite a mix of media for communicating meaning, including video, images, and sounds. While some instructors hesitate to integrate multimodality because of assessment difficulties and questions regarding their pedagogical value, many writing instructors such as Tom Romano, Cynthia Selfe, and Jody Shipka celebrate the promise of such assignments to engage students, cater to multiple intelligences, and circulate among broader audiences. This chapter will focus on the visual essay’s potential to engage students in authentic, self-directed thinking and ask them to consider fully the aptness of mode appropriate to purpose, audience, and context. I will then argue that these challenges involved in composing a visual essay have implications for the teaching of more traditional academic compositions. Writing instruction that invites a multimodal approach on occasion might be one way that teachers can invite student writers to discover a wider range of writing opportunities, promoting deeper thinking about writing as a process.

Chapter Four seeks to discover and define pedagogically sound, student-centered feasible assignments that secondary classroom teachers could use upon first venturing in the world of multimodality. I acknowledge the realistic challenges of integrating visual composing experiences into the classroom, particularly digital-based compositions such as websites and movies, and propose a visual essay assignment that understands these concerns. I will overview
the assignment and its pedagogical basis, describe objective-driven activities that foreground the cross-training benefits offered by the visual composing experience, and suggest ways in which the visual essay offers students and instructors expanded perspectives on approaching traditional academic writing.

Regardless of their sport, young athletes are particularly susceptible to overuse injuries and mental burnout, resulting from year-round participation and the cultural trend of pushing athletes to specialize in a single sport at an early age (Brenner 1242). On the other hand, multi-sport athletes “have the highest potential to achieve the goal of lifelong fitness and enjoyment of physical activity” argue experts in sports medicine (1244). Just as exploring athletic pursuits other than running can improve runners’ physical strength, agility, and balance, so too might opportunities to explore multimodal composition benefit students pedagogically when they return to traditional writing assignments. The cross-trained writer will demonstrate a broader array of communication skills, exhibit flexibility in moving between modes of communication, and possess a more balanced understanding of communication and its applications in society. After all, just as athletic participation aims to promote lifelong fitness, so too should a general education aim to equip students with the skills necessary to communicate in their future personal and professional lives.
Chapter One: Running with the Pack or Leading the Race: Teaching Communication in a Visual, Participatory Culture

Writing instruction has long been a key, indisputable component of secondary Language Arts curricula. Yet, the statistics that pertain specifically to high school writing instruction are troublesome: According to data from 2007 published in “The State of Writing Instruction in America’s Schools” authored by University at Albany researchers Arther N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer and compiled from the College Board, the National Writing Project, and the Center on English Learning and Achievement, high school students spent little time each week on school-sponsored writing. For example, nearly half of surveyed seniors reported that they were never expected to produce a paper in English class of three or more pages (Applebee and Langer ii). Citing an earlier 2003 report by the National Commission on Writing, the later report concludes that few students can produce satisfactory prose, defined as “precise, engaging, and coherent” (qtd. in Applebee and Langer 2). Further adding to the dismal picture, the report finds a slight decrease in overall time dedicated to writing-related instruction in eighth grade classes between 2002 and 2005—a reduction the authors suggest may be due to high stakes testing where math and reading are measured most regularly1 (6). Overall, the report raises concerns about students’ writing proficiencies, the quantity of writing required of them, and the relevance of assigned writing tasks. Thus, the report casts doubts on constructivist philosophies of education, differentiated instruction movements that cater to students’ multiple intelligences, and efforts to make learning relevant by integrating popular culture. Just as athletes new to cross-training fear that time spent away from their primary sport will be detrimental to their development, so too do

---

1 The report suggests that in this standardized testing era where reading and math are measured most regularly, “writing may be in danger of dropping from attention” (Applebee and Langer ii).
critics of these visual and hands-on assignments fear that time allocated to them would be better spent teaching traditional writing skills.

Yet, in the 21st century, are the traditional literacy skills—primarily reading and writing print texts—still sufficient? What might an expanded definition of literacy in the 21st century encompass? As many scholars point out, the technologies of this era have sparked new ways of communicating, modes that rely heavily on visual aspects and genres contrasting starkly with academic prose. These genres include text messaging, online gaming, and blogging as digital forms, as well as printed genres developing from the convergence of writing and technology, such as zines (adapted, scaled-down magazines) and collage-like remixes. Still, the majority of Language Arts curricula operate within outdated expectations. Thus, composition teachers stand at a crossroads: they may either continue in the present tempo, failing to keep pace with writing needs fueled by media and technology, or choose to take the lead, forging ahead to discover the challenges and rewards of teaching 21st century literacies.

Closing the Gap: Chasing the Pace Set by Visual and Participatory Culture

“It has been said that if a physician from 1900 visited a modern-day hospital, he would be stunned by the changes; but if an English teacher from 1900 visited a school today, he or she would feel strangely at home. It is naïve to imagine that these conservative forces will magically disappear in the twenty-first century, or that technology itself will make them obsolete.” – Thomas Newkirk, The Neglected “R”

As Yancey observes, “Never before has the proliferation of writings outside of the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside. Never before have the technologies of writing contributed so quickly to the creation of new genres” (“Made Not Only in Words” 297). These new compositions often exceed schooling’s traditional understandings of literacy, prompting scholars to reconsider literacy’s definition in the contemporary culture. Yancey is not the first to suggest that literacy studies might include skills beyond the ability to read and compose a
traditional essay. A 1996 summit of literacy specialists, including Kress, proposed the following additional literacies, or multiliteracies, as vital for the future’s communicative demands: visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal, this final mode encompassing elements of each of the other five (New London Group 61). If education has responded at all to the call for expanded literacy, it has paid the most attention to addressing visuality, sometimes in conjunction with media literacy, another increasingly acceptable area of study in classrooms.

The field of visual literacy, though certainly a disputed term and category, has long been the most prominent candidate for adoption into definitions of literacy. Generally understood as the ability to decipher images and comprehend visual-heavy messages, its present resurgence in conversations among various theorists, cultural critics, and educators has been fueled by the availability of technology enabling the average person to easily and affordably participate in the production and reproduction of images. While many scholars support a pedagogy inclusive of visual communication, even those who do so are uncomfortable with the overzealous application of the term literacy to increasingly broad ranges of practices, including the extension of literacy to denote the practices assumed in the term visual literacy. As Kress and van Leeuwen note, “The more that is gathered up in the meaning of the term, the less meaning it has. Something that has come to mean everything is likely not to mean very much at all” (Literacy in the New Media Age 22). Instead of applying the term literacy broadly to all instances of decoding and encoding, they argue that literacy should remain limited to messages using letters to communicate a message (23). To discuss other communicative practices more accurately, they assert, scholarship must develop more specific registers for each area of study.

The extension of literacy to discussions of visuality contributes to the controversies surrounding its scholarly merit. One debate emerges because the term visual literacy implies that
viewers simply read images as they do words. Kress and van Leeuwen explain in *Reading Images and Literacy in the New Media Age* that decoding differences exist between the two modes, which are overlooked in the transfer of terms. Another controversy stems from the term’s ambiguity, since definitions tend to include a diverse range of competencies. These include: identifying images as representations, possessing a set of interpretive skills, identifying and understanding the choices behind the image, and the ability to create images (Elkins 137-39). Composition scholar Anne Francis Wysocki’s definition pertains most usefully to composition’s interests in communication, limiting visual literacy to “the ability to read, understand, value, and learn from visual materials […] and the ability to create, combine, and use visual elements […] and messages for the purposes of communicating” (*Writing New Media* 69).

Although interest in the instructional value of visual literacy seems particularly relevant given the concern for educational reforms and the prevalence of images in contemporary society, an awareness of and qualms about visual culture’s influence is not unique to our present moment. In his treatise on pictures, *Picture Theory*, Mitchell argues that this era showcases the most recent installment in a long series of cultural debates regarding visuality sparked by changes in technology and art. “The fear of the image,” he explains, “the anxiety that the ‘power of images’ may finally destroy even their creators and manipulators, is as old as image-making itself.” These moments of heightened attention to visuality he terms *pictorial turns* (15). In other words, pictorial turns of the past have frequently received mixed welcomes and often reawakened the rivalry between words and images. For example, the attention to the influences of visual culture on students and classroom learning only echoes the concerns voiced in the middle of the twentieth century in response to the advent of television. In short, the contention surrounding visual literacy has been re-awakened, rather than newly introduced.
While historically and culturally familiar, the clash at the intersection of visual culture and educational rigor hosts a new provocateur: the rise of technology enabling the affordable reproduction and circulation of images (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 15). According to Hocks and Jenkins, the influence of digital technologies cannot be ignored in a student-centered classroom. Hocks explains, “Visual rhetoric, or visual strategies used for meaning and persuasion, is hardly new, but its importance has been amplified by the visual and interactive nature of native hypertext and multimedia writing” (629). Through these media, messages can more readily transmit information in ways that cater to audiences immersed in these practices. Indicating a larger societal shift from consumer culture to what Jenkins terms *participatory culture*, students engage in social exchanges previously inaccessible to them. According to Jenkins, the arrival of participatory culture followed the emergence of new media technologies, which vested in the average person the power to “archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful ways” (*Confronting* 8). Key characteristics of this development include low barriers to expression and civic engagement, and strong support for creating and sharing one’s work with others (4). Consider CNN and The Weather Channel, two major news media outlets that embrace this development. CNN’s television broadcasts and website both feature iReports, inviting viewers to submit their photographs and video recordings of news events and presenting a broader spectrum of eyewitness accounts. The Weather Channel similarly blurs the boundary between viewing and participating, often featuring individuals’ still images and video footage in its iWitness Weather segments. The influence of this new factor, technology fueling participatory culture, resonates among students and within society, calling into question the conventional classroom’s steadfast adherence to traditional ways of teaching and learning.

*A Mile in Their Shoes: Students of the 21st Century*
Perhaps more than ever before, today’s students engage differently with literacy practices outside of school than did other generations, and this may influence students’ perceptions of—and their practices in—the writing classroom. Their social practices may reflect habits, familiarities, and preferences acquired from their experiences in the digital, visual culture that clash with the writing classroom’s conventional expectations. These mindsets might even conflict with students’ willingness to learn and use traditional forms of communication. Echoing early student-centered compositionist Mina Shaughnessy, Wysocki and Williams suggest that teachers acknowledge and be informed about the literacies students bring with them into the writing classroom. According to Wysocki, without knowledge of the “literacies practiced in the home, the community, the church, and online; literacies depending on oral, visual, and aural performance; literacies based in multiple languages, cultures, and contexts” teachers might mistakenly perceive their students as lacking in abilities when in fact they possess different abilities (Writing New Media 57). Williams also favors closing this gap between theory and practice by recognizing and inviting expanded literacies into classrooms. He observes that focusing on traditional academic skills overlooks valuable 21st century, student-centered skills and interests adolescents acquire outside of school:

For many teachers, the question of whether students are effective readers or writers continues to be grounded in terms of conventional academic literacy practices. Do students write expository prose well? Do they read novels and understand character development? Can they step back from a subject and engage in analysis? Can they conduct research from credible sources? […] What has
traditionally been left out of these definitions are the literacy practices students engage in outside of schools. ("Leading" 702-03)

For example, while students frequently mix pictures and words digitally for their webpages or online social networks, or in paper collages stashed into binder cover sleeves and locker doors, these literacy practices are largely ignored in classrooms. Yet, these practices reflect habits, familiarities, and preferences acquired from students’ experiences in the digital, visual culture that might even conflict with their willingness to learn and use traditional forms of communication.

Reflecting their upbringing in a participatory culture, today’s students not only consume images but also participate in their production and reproduction to a degree unmatched by any preceding generation. Twenty-first century students, asserts educational critic Marc Prensky, are “digital natives,” meaning they fluently engage with technologies such as computers, video games, and the Internet (1). Because students are so familiar with digital devices, argues Prensky, they can use objects such as calculators, personal music devices, and cameras as “extensions of their brains” (3). According to Williams, students use these technologies not only as extensions of their brains, but also as extensions of themselves. Through their engagement with these tools, they portray themselves in particular ways that reflect their constructions of personal identity and voice. Though he acknowledges that “this creation of a particular identity in writing is as old as literacy itself,” the unprecedented aspect stems from participatory culture’s low barriers to distribution and resulting likelihood of audience response (“Tomorrow” 682). Through digital tools, he argues, students perform their identities, communicating across multiple media and varying their personas according to audience. Literacy, Williams concludes, is more than a set of skills—it is a social practice (683). Just as those concerned with educational achievement often
take into account students’ social and cultural backgrounds, so too should they consider the
visual-heavy social practices students engage in outside of school as influencing student
achievement.

Outside the classroom, students are engaging readily with these technologies and new genres
in ways that reflect their immersion in particular cultural trends. Williams’ research demonstrates
that students are accustomed to performing their identities across multiple modes of
representation, appropriating visual, audio, and verbal content from various sources and
juxtaposing artifacts from different modes side by side (8). Jenkins defines this intersection
where different modes meet and traditional and new media collide as convergence culture. In
convergence culture, participants “seek out new information and make connections among
dispersed media content” (“Introduction” 3), building on the foundation of a participatory
culture. This media content often includes a rich array of visual artifacts such as professional
photographs from news media sites to personal snapshots hosted on electronic album websites.
Students participate in this “world of collage” (62), often creating mash-ups or remixes out of
traditional genres, multi-genre pieces that often build on the foundation of the more conventional
pre-existing text by mixing in elements of more popular genres (65). A mash-up, for example,
might redesign a much-discussed magazine cover featuring a prominent political figure and
repurpose it into a parody of that individual assembled from a blend of poetry, slogans, and
photographs. Not only do these texts vary greatly from the traditional written essay, but the way
they engage with audiences also varies greatly from the traditional classroom’s economy of
writing. Students’ self-sponsored writing practices are increasingly participatory and interactive,
exhibiting elements typical of a participatory culture (5). Their compositions, often circulated
online, are available to an active audience likely to respond (8). Thus, whereas in the classroom
students’ products typically circulate between the student and the teacher, outside the classroom. Students build relationships with their audiences, creating networks of peer feedback (196). By welcoming a broader range of writing experiences into the classroom, teachers can harness the excitement and familiarity that students have for some of these literacy practices. In recognizing these developments and creating assignments that prompt students to critically consider their practices, teachers work toward a student-centered approach to writing instruction.

Expanded Literacies: Critics and Supporters

While educational institutions cannot ignore the existence of the visually rich environment outside of school and the visual practices favored by students, most Language Arts classrooms remain a heavily—if not exclusively—print-based environment. Critics opposing expanded literacies reveal inherited traditional attitudes that privilege academia as they cite concerns for academic rigor. Much like Western culture conceptualizes the development of written communication as a progressive march toward sophistication, educational theory offers a similar story in the philosophies of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget theorized the intellectual development of children as occurring in stages. He considered symbolic language acquisition as primitive and basic, a stage preceding the more mature and complex learning of written language (4). Visual images, resultantly, are commonly believed to be “dumbed down” versions of more sophisticated language-based communication, and permitting students to include visual elements in their compositions often prompts these concern for standards of scholarship. Thus, skeptics view pictures in the classroom not as a worthy subject of study but as a bribe that baits unengaged students, as a crutch that patronizes struggling learners, or as a surrogate that displaces the more intellectual ways of communicating. The struggles to dispel
traditional beliefs about writing studies in secondary education are further exacerbated by institutional structures, including the limited skills valued in standardized testing.

Media theorist Neil Postman emerged as one of the earliest and most prominent critics of expanded literacies. In *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, which responds to calls for using television and other media in the classroom, he advocates for distanced skepticism, conceiving of classrooms as safeguarded vantage points distinctively separate from culture. Only through an unbiased academic lens afforded by this retreat, Postman argues, can students panoramically, insightfully, and critically view contemporary culture. Through critique rather than immersion, he contends, students will be better equipped to harness the positive and negative effects of these social shifts (46-47). Rather than yield to cultural trends by practicing them in the classroom, Postman argues that schools should maintain a cultural equilibrium by countering cultural trends with adherence to traditional scholarship.

Contemporary critics echo Postman’s assertion that adopting popular practices into academia contributes to, rather than combats, the decline in rigor. Because pictures are so often used in compensatory ways, classrooms integrating them garner criticism for what many perceive to be a growing trend in schools: more class time spent on projects perhaps considered fun, but questionable in educational value. Schmoker coins the phrase *Crayola curriculum* to describe classrooms that embrace visual-heavy and hands-on activities at the expense of traditional literacy practices. What follows in this opinion piece by English professor Donna Harrington-Lueker published in *USA Today* blames the increase in Crayola curricula for the decrease in student writing proficiency:

“Talk to teachers, review messages posted on e-mail groups and browse professional journals, and you’ll find high school assignments that are long on fun
and remarkably short on actual writing [...] While such activities may be more entertaining for students, and less work for the teachers in terms of grading the projects, kids are often showing up at college unable to write.

Seen as “dumbed down” versions of more sophisticated language-based communication and often used in such ways that confirm critics’ worst fears, explorations of visuality in the classroom struggle for mainstream acceptance.

Visual literacy’s critics state an additional concern: an already overflowing curriculum in a culture of standardized testing. The adage “what is measured is treasured” rings true in contemporary Language Arts curricula. The culture of high-stakes testing—particularly writing tests that require students to respond in traditional written language, primarily the five-paragraph essay—promotes the perpetuation of print-based, essayistic traditional forms of writing. Critics argue that students continuously struggle with traditional essays and fundamental writing skills such as constructing coherent sentences, thesis statements, and organization. As long as this persists, there remains no time to leisurely explore other options at the expense of time spent on the academic essay. Fish, a cultural critic and English professor, argues that anything not strictly concerned with traditional writing skills has no place in the English classroom: “They will certainly not be learning anything about how language works; and without a knowledge of how language works they will be unable either to spot the formal breakdown of someone else’s language or to prevent the formal breakdown of their own” (“Devoid of Content”). He strongly asserts that “unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are a sham, and I advise administrators to insist that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else” (“What Should Colleges Teach?”). Citing crumbling standards, falling standardized test scores, and underprepared high school graduates, Fish asserts that teachers who
invite their students to explore these new visual means of communication are contributing to declining literacy skills.

Postman, Schmoker, and Fish, who argue that traditional education need not dedicate instruction time to such trivial and/or non-academic communicative modes, adopt what Jenkins criticizes as a *laissez-faire approach* to expanded literacies. According to Jenkins, their attitudes produce and reproduce three critical educational deficits: the participation gap, the ethical gap, and the transparency problem. He defines the *participation gap* as the disparity in educational opportunities among different student populations. It emerges when teachers prohibit these opportunities, wrongly assuming that all students enjoy equal access to resources such as time, technology, and raw materials necessary for composing such texts. He warns that preparing some students for this culture and not others could perpetuate divisions between students prepared to produce messages and students merely prepared to consume them. Jenkins implies that the participation gap overwhelmingly affects students of low socioeconomic status. The *ethical gap* is a second deficiency that he observes. Jenkins defines this gap as emerging from a lack of instruction pertaining to the ethical use of non-print materials. While some students may integrate non-print work into their own extracurricular productions, they often do so unethically unless teachers instruct students on how to properly give credit to non-print sources. The transparency problem is a third deficiency perpetuated by the laissez-faire approach. It results from teachers’ failures to instruct students in analyzing popular and non-print texts on the grounds that such texts are straightforward and require no efforts to decode, or that students already possess such skills because these texts surround them. This lack of instruction assumes that students innately understand how media shapes their perceptions (15). As the National Conference for Teachers of English (NCTE) Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies
explains, however, exploring multiple literacies “should not be considered [a] curricular luxur[y].” Jenkins’ identification of these assumptions indicates the need for schools to make opportunities for exploring expanded literacies, specifically visual literacies, a curricular priority.

Bolstering Jenkins’ argument, Susan Sontag and bell hooks warn of the consequences of failing to educate students to critically receive and produce visual representations. Sontag, a contemporary media critic, mentions in the collection of essays in *On Photography* that a lack of visual literacy contributes to class stratification. She argues that ideologies of class, race, and gender that maintain capitalism are re-inscribed through images, and that viewers unaware of the power at play will accept their positions more readily (178). In an essay on photography in the home, author, feminist, and social activist hooks expounds on the importance of self-representation and participation in cultural production. In the piece “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” hooks says that the civil rights movement was about more than equal rights or equal access—it was about control over images (81). Representation, she asserts, is as important—if not more important—than equal access. As a site of cultural production, the writing classroom is a particularly vital stage for examining the mechanisms behind the messages produced for mass consumption. Thus, to equip today’s students with the tools for maneuvering successfully and powerfully through their futures, numerous composition scholars concerned with critical pedagogy argue that literacy education must include not only the ability to read or consume this material, but also to compose or produce it.

In addition to social reasons for addressing expanded literacies, scholars including Kress and van Leeuwen cite changing workplace needs as another reason for increasing attention to these new modes of communication. Since education endeavors to prepare students for future success in society and the workplace, they argue that schools must teach fluency in modes beyond just
print-based communication. “Not being ‘visually literate’ will begin to attract social sanctions. ‘Visual literacy’ will begin to be a matter of survival, especially in the workplace” (Reading Images 3). If the educational system continues to uphold traditional print modes of thought and communication to the near exclusion of other modalities, schools risk preparing students for a world that changed before they ever entered it. Advocates for visual literacy thus assert that schools must reexamine their curricular goals in light of the visual, participatory nature of communication in future workplaces and social settings. As cultural shifts demand new fluencies, instructors must reassess the skills needed and expand their classroom agendas to include these skills.

Most of these petitions for change implicate classroom teachers as most responsible for updating classroom activities; however, institutional barriers may inhibit even those who are most willing. Teacher education programs, for example, have failed to equip future educators with the theoretical foundations or practical skills necessary for confidently and expertly addressing expanded literacies within Language Arts curricula. Presently, a lack of teacher training in expanded literacy subjects leaves teachers unprepared to defend even pedagogically sound actions against skeptics and critics, and heightens the possibility for poor implementation that fuels these concerns. Composition scholar Diana George argues that through professional development, teachers can promote an understanding that visual communication is itself not necessarily a simpler communicative discourse simply because it is most often used that way (20). Even knowledgeable teachers have long been limited by a lack of pathways for bringing such tools into the classroom. Despite rising access to the Internet in schools, many classrooms lack more than a single computer, and computer lab time is too scarce to move beyond the most basic integration of these visual elements. As visual literacy continues to assert its importance as
time propels us ever forward, George predicts that rather than get with the times, schools will lag further and further behind: “My guess is that many of these difficulties will not ease up yet another age of back-to-basics talk and threats of outcomes-based funding” (32).

***

In this present pictorial turn, classrooms are the battleground for what art history scholar Barbara Marie Stafford dubs “a kind of literacy civil war—one that pits the poetic against the popular and words against pictures” (19). Kress and van Leeuwen specify, however, that image anxiety most often emerges when visual communication “forms an alternative to writing and can therefore be seen as a potential threat to the present dominance of verbal literacy among elite groups” (Reading Images 17). This most certainly manifests itself in classrooms. Most who promote expanded literacies acknowledge that teachers face pedagogical and philosophical dilemmas: do they deviate from tradition and risk the disrespect of colleagues and communities who believe these expanded literacies are merely dumbed-down literacies? Face their insecurities and risk learning alongside students? Spend less time on test preparation at a time when test scores may determine job security? Or do they prepare students to communicate effectively in their social futures? Perhaps conceiving of adventures in alternative modes as cross-training experiences might mitigate the anxieties prompted by such binaries.

Despite a growing acceptance for visual elements in the classroom, there remains a reluctance to accept that “literacy means more than words, and visual literacy means more than play” (George 16). As students usually progress through educational institutions, attention to visual communication declines from elementary years where students engage frequently with images to communicate, to secondary school years where writing remains the primary mode of communication. Thus, the pedagogical potential prompted by cross-training opportunities remain
greatly untapped. If the educational trajectory does not foreground visual literacy as a priority, Kress and van Leeuwen state the ominous consequences: By refusing to engage fully with this new ‘visual literacy,’ they argue, “institutional education, under the pressure of often reactionary political demands, produces illiterates” (*Reading Images* 17), thus echoing photographer Laszlo Mahony-Nagy’s 80-year-old prediction: that “The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as the pen” (qtd. in Peres 212).
Chapter Two: The War Between Pictures and Words: And How to End It

I take my title from composition scholar Peter Elbow’s “War Between Reading and Writing.” In the article, he overviews the causes of the rift between reading and writing, explains how and why secondary classrooms privilege reading, and concludes with advice on how to craft a class that benefits from the “productive interaction” between the two (5). This chapter seeks to examine an analogous “war” between pictures and words, following Elbow’s framework to investigate how the divide between the two modes can at times be set aside to promote a similarly productive interaction.

Often, young sports enthusiasts enjoy an array of recreational athletic experiences. Many boys, for example, enjoy participating in both football and soccer. As they grow into teenagers, however, the pressure to specialize grows as seasons expand to year-round schedules, coaches fear for injuries contracted from other sports, and parents aspire to develop their student-athlete into a player capable of earning a lucrative college athletic scholarship in a high-profile sport. What many of these proponents of athletic specializing overlook, however, are the physical and mental benefits that athletes reap from participating in other sports. Just as many athletes are forced to choose between sports at young ages, specializing in just one for much of their adolescence, so too are many classrooms forced to choose between communicative modes as grade levels ascend, specializing increasingly in written communication. Yet, by separating pictures and words, Language Arts classrooms have overlooked the pedagogical benefits of cross-training writers across verbal and visual modes.

From children’s earliest literacy experiences, pictures and words seem a natural pairing. Parents and teachers read aloud to their young children from richly illustrated texts, and children use images for expressing their responses. As students progress through grade levels, the two
communicative modes become increasingly separated. Whereas elementary students engage frequently with images to communicate, older students are gradually weaned off of visual expression in favor of written expression. If education has valued images at all in secondary classrooms, these occasions remain rare and restricted primarily to instances where subservient images supplement written explanations. Because re-introducing visuality into the writing classroom’s agenda will no doubt generate resistance, teachers preparing to enter this territory will benefit from an understanding of the sites of conflict between pictures and words.

The privileging of words in Western culture stems from a variety of factors. One includes Western culture’s regard for writing as a status symbol, marking the accomplishment of cultural development from primitive to sophisticated. A second component is the limited vocabulary for discussing visual communication, which inhibits a more complete understanding of how visual texts communicate meaning. A third consideration examines a biased defense of words. A final factor maintaining the superiority of words is a pattern of use that employs visual elements in only marginally productive ways. These attitudes and practices further inflame the disparaging attitudes toward images, reinforcing a limited and biased understanding of the affordances of different communicative modes.

• Privileging pictures threatens the Western cultural narrative.

The value-laden privileging of written communication in Western culture, an accomplishment long associated with a culture’s achievement of sophistication and advancement, has contributed to the continued reign of words over pictures. According to Mitchell, students learn the history of writing as a “story of progress.” The narrative often commences with the primitive depiction of early cultures, which used pictures and gestures to communicate, and advances to the sophisticated contemporary era, which achieved the development of “proper” alphabetic writing.
(Picture Theory 113). The development of writing, argue experts such as Walter Ong, enabled humanity to think more abstractly. As he explains, “We know that totally oral peoples, intelligent and wise enough though they often are, are incapable of the protracted, intensive linear analysis that we have from Plato’s Socrates. Even when he talks, Plato’s Socrates is using thought forms brought into being by writing” (29). The development of writing, Ong ascertains, restructures thought. Given this widely accepted theory, the replacement of writing could have cognitive consequences. Thus, as Mitchell claims, “At stake is not simply one form of communication; at stake is the way we think, where we begin” (The Rise of the Image 16).

Because word-based communication intertwines with it ideas about Western society’s superiority, the demise of the word invites alarmist speculation that Western society, too, is collapsing. For a culture to surrender ground to non-verbal communication would be to, at worst, regress to the place of so-called primitive eras, jeopardizing the cultural and intellectual superiority that some associate with sophistication. Kress and van Leeuwen conclude, “No wonder that the move towards a new literacy, based on images and visual design, can come to be seen as a threat, a sign of the decline of culture, and hence a particularly potent symbol and rallying point for conservative and even reactionary social groupings” (Reading Images 17). Composition teachers, charged with the responsibility of transmitting this culturally valuable tradition of print-based literacy, purportedly contribute to—rather than combat—the “fall of the word” if they fail to reinforce the dominance of words over pictures.

While the attention to visuality and coinciding concerns seem to be a recent development, neither the prevalence of images nor apprehensions toward their proliferation are unique to this era. A distrust of images reveals itself in humanity’s earliest texts, including those of the Ancient Greeks and in various books of the Bible and Qaran. Plato complained that painters’
representations were “very far removed from the truth,” yet portrayed themselves as more truthful than the truth conveyed by superior philosophers (The Republic X). Another criticism emerges in Plato’s allegory of the cave, which demonstrates the consequences of misunderstanding representations and reality (VII). As Mitchell observes, such imitations then devalue the real objects they replicated (Mitchell, What do Pictures Want? 521). The Biblical story of Moses, Aaron, and the golden calf similarly emphasizes the fear of false replicas garnering the attention due instead to the singular deserving original. In violation of the first of God’s Ten Commandments, which tells people to have no false idols (Exodus 20:4), Aaron makes a golden calf to represent the God of Israel when the Israelites struggle to maintain their faith in the absence of Moses’ leadership. In attending to an imitation, the people conflate the imitation and the original, thus jeopardizing the original and consecrated object’s sacred status. The contemporary example of photography has similarly been targeted for claiming to represent reality. Photography’s perceived realism beguiles viewers into perceiving the subject matter as more available than it actually is, explains Sontag, and they are “transfixed” and “anesthetized” by this power (20). Critics attribute an increased willingness to trust visual representations to the increasing prevalence of images. A corresponding inability to differentiate between representations and misrepresentations, they argue, indicates a decline in intellectualism.

Still images are not the sole medium accused of distracting culture from deeper thinking and scholarly pursuits. Television has garnered similar blame among academics. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright called it “chewing gum for the eyes”; historian Theodore Roszak described it as a “narcotic disintegration of the sensibilities”; and former Pope John Paul II accused it of “glorif[y]ing] sex and violence and recklessly spread[ing] false values” (qtd. in Mitchell, The Rise of the Image 26). Cultural critics targeting education have argued that television, as mere
amusement with simple visual delivery, displaces thinking and inhibits learning. Postman, for example, asserts that watching television shortens students’ attention spans, cripples their skills in decoding linguistic symbols, and has led to lower SAT scores and a rising enrollment in remedial writing courses (“The Day our Children Disappear” 382). McCloud explains prevailing attitudes toward images as a major hurdle: “Words and pictures together are considered at best a diversion for the masses. At worst, a product of crass commercialism” (140). Similarly, video games, computers, and graphic novels have all rallied critics concerned about the effect of visual immersion on students’ learning abilities. The expansion of production opportunities to the masses has resulted in images reproducing at a rate exceeding that of serious scholarship and claiming the favor of the non-elite masses. Blamed for causing moral, political, social, or education crises, pictures lack recourse for salvaging their reputations. Pessimistic concerns for culture’s deterioration fuel the reign of word-based communication over visual communication and suggest that saving words will save the culture.

- The limited terminology used to discuss images prompts misunderstandings about the work they do and how they do it.

The rift between pictures and words in composition studies stems from a failure to see pictures as richly structured texts, a problem prompted by borrowed terminology. While many scholars argue in support of a pedagogy that includes the study of how images transmit meaning, even those who do so are uncomfortable with the use of literacy in the widely circulated term visual literacy. Problematically, the term connotes that images can be read in the same way that words are. Literacy, traditionally defined as the ability to read and write, indicates one’s ability to decode incoming written information and encode outgoing messages in word-based writing. Borrowing the terminology of verbal literacy and applying it to visual texts further handicaps
efforts to unveil the intelligent structure of pictures. While the term *reading* aptly describes how to investigate a word-based text, the same approach cannot aptly define how to approach pictures. An audience schooled in the conventions of reading understands the process of reading to proceed in a linear reading path, from left to right, from top to bottom, from the first page to the final page. Whereas word-based texts often exhibit closed, linear reading paths, images usually exhibit an open, nonlinear reading path, if any (Kress and van Leeuwen, *Literacy in the New Media Age* 58). When comparing the two modes for their ability to explicitly direct an audience, images remain perpetually inferior when measured against words and their linearity. As a result, pictures are infused with the potential for chaos, confusion, or misinterpretation. However, such accusations overlook that conventions do exist for composing and interpreting images—they are simply different conventions than those used by composers of verbal messages. A lack of vocabulary fails to define these differences, mistakenly asserting that only one approach exists for decoding a text: the linear approach of reading.

The connotations of the term *visual literacy* overwhelmingly suggest not the development of critical consciousness toward visuality, but instead the exercising of a seemingly innate physical reflex. Photography critics, for example, emphasize the often-invisible mechanisms operating behind an image and expound on the consequences of viewing photographs as unmediated, straightforward depictions of subjects rather than as photographers’ interpretations of those subjects. As Sontag explains, a photograph’s perceived rawness endows it with a false ethos of authenticity, beguiling viewers into trusting images they might otherwise approach more critically (74). Proponents for teaching visual literacy argue that skillful looking involves more than the use of one’s eyes to receive evident information. To develop in students the skills necessary to examine the choices behind an image, advocates support a further curricular
designated for visual literacy. Yet, overlooking the critical thinking ideally involved in looking maintains the popular misunderstandings that conflate access to seeing with access to understanding, thus perpetuating attitudes that upholds the primacy of print.

• Defining what pictures cannot do constructs a weak defense of words.

As words have long maintained a superior status over images in academia, critiques of words reflect conventional attitudes that overlook imbalances in instruction and diverse communicative contexts. A major argument defending the superiority of words dismisses the wealth of training readers receive in the conventions of print. In the “Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes asserts that non-linguistic representations are too “polysemous” to stand alone. Open to so many possible interpretations, he observes, images require more stable verbal language to anchor them (274). Words and their closed reading paths, measured against images and their openness, seemingly possess an inherent order that protects against the ambiguity of images that Barthes observes. Yet, such denunciations ignore the conventions that composers of images follow to direct their audiences (Kress and van Leeuwen, Reading Images 17-18). Photographers and other visual artists often compose their images according to conventions of the discipline, abiding by aspects such as the rule of thirds, S-curves, contrast, and perspective. Much like students trained in decoding words read them according to particular conventions, so too would students trained in decoding images examine them according to conventions.

Another weak defense of words assumes that words communicate more effectively than is possible in other modes. Such assumptions hail precision as the primary measurement of efficacy regardless of audience and context. Lacking a clear reading path, a photograph’s openness may evoke a multiplicity of messages and potential confusion. Sontag cites this ambiguity as one reason pictures cannot provide sufficient context for narrating a story or inventing a persuasive
Theorists including art critic John Berger, however, contend that images can sometimes capture what is otherwise inexpressible through words. He explains that in some situations, “a photograph’s lack of intentionality becomes its strength, its lucidity” (125), and that it offers “a coherence which, instead of narrating, instigates ideas” (128). Literary critic Marie Laure Ryan’s study of narratology concurs with Berger’s contention that such openness can be generative, concluding that images possess ”narrativity” that need not be coded in discourse (11). Sometimes images may communicate ideas that are beyond discourse. In other instances, effective communication must require less time and cognitive attention than decoding words. In these cases, images accomplish the task quickly and precisely. For example, highway signs utilize images to efficiently communicate to drivers who can only momentary take their eyes off the road. Other times, images such as charts or graphs explain information effectively that might otherwise take multiple pages to communicate. Thus, as Kress and van Leeuwen argue, “Not everything that can be realized in language can also be realized by means of images, or vice versa” (Reading Images 18). While the familiar adage states that a picture is worth a thousand words, a closer study of images reveals not only the truth of the statement in particular situations, but that a picture can sometimes accomplish more than would be possible through words alone.

Such an assumption that words communicate more effectively than is possible in other modes also assumes much about the precision of words. Philosophers on language dispute this claim. Kenneth Burke and Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, highlight the ambiguity inherent in words, especially in those which must be both precise and general. For example, a tree must be defined specifically enough to stand apart from other similar objects, but defined generally enough to include the variety of shapes and sizes. Burke explains that in attempts to be “all inclusive,” words are characterized by “generalization” that evokes ambiguity (815). As Nietzsche explains,
words are inherently ambiguous because “we obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual” (1174). Similar misunderstandings can develop at macro levels. As Kress and van Leeuwen argue, “A story may be written to entertain, but an interpreter may not be entertained because of the story’s built-in ethnocentric bias against the interpreter’s ethnic group” (Multimodal Discourse 8). A defense of words that subjugates images assumes that a logical reading path protects against multiple interpretations and overlooks the imprecision inherent in language.

- While composers may too often employ visual elements in only marginally productive ways, visual elements have a wealth of productivity potential.

Many a writing teacher has been disappointed and frustrated when, upon visiting the computer lab with the hopes of seeing students engaged in composing and revising, students instead experiment with fonts, colors, and clip art for the majority of the class period. At the end, though students have explored the many visual tools the software programs make available, they have reaped few of the academic benefits. Even if the product is visually appealing—which often, it’s not—their visual choices contribute little or nothing to meeting their communicative objectives. Rather than think, all they have done is play. Lacking knowledge of good design, students often fall victim to the wealth of tools word processing applications make available. The misuse of these tools, often frustrating to teachers, demonstrates students’ tendencies to use seductive details—elements of a message that attract a reader’s attention yet fail to support its content and even detract from its effectiveness (Wiley 206). Patterns of misuse that infrequently result in quality work deter teachers from further exploring the concept of document design. The challenge for teachers is to both see the value of this play and push students toward more productive usage that enhances, rather than weakens, the rhetorical power of student-produced
texts. Teachers and students can both understand that attending to a composition’s visual design is just another of many choices writers make based on their purpose, audience, and context. Rather than outlaw the tool, visual literacy aspires to educate the user to effectively employ the tools to compose texts that achieve their fullest potential.

Knowing that pictures as a communicative mode will likely not go away, Language Arts classrooms have increasingly but cautiously introduced images into their curricula. In doing so, teachers often face scrutiny because the general public harbors misconceptions regarding the valuable learning gains offered by experiences in visuality. Without awareness of the way images operate, students remain unarmed against the barrage of visually encoded messages and vulnerable to manipulation. Rather than exclude images from classrooms, maintaining the gap between the school world and the outside world, schools should counter these attitudes that indiscriminately privilege print by recognizing that different modes operate differently and helping students choose what Kress calls the aptness of mode for their purpose, audience, and context (“Gains and Losses” 21).

Activities for Examining Aptness of Mode

A more productive use of the tension between pictures and words might equip students to be more effective communicators by facilitating examinations of each mode’s strengths and weaknesses. Useful questions for approaching an examination of aptness of mode are raised by Mitchell in Picture Theory. He suggests that rather than compare pictures and words, focus on determining the significance of those differences. He writes, “The real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?’ But ‘what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?’ That is, why does it matter how words and images are juxtaposed, blended, or
separated?” (90). Classroom activities that address these questions might include examining texts typically perceived as monomodal for their multimodal aspects, composing hybrid visual-verbal texts, and taking texts established in one mode and redesigning them for others.

A first approach for attending to aptness of mode involves examining the modality of texts. Mitchell, Bernhardt, and George argue that even traditional print texts exhibit multimodality through document design. Mitchell writes, “All media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes” (Picture Theory 94-95). Bernhardt, like Mitchell, asserts that print texts include visual cues such as paragraph breaks that implicitly communicate meaning to readers, guiding them visually through content. Bernhardt further notes that print texts are received visually through optical means (“Seeing the Text” 67). George cites the Modern Language Association’s strictures for research paper formatting as an indication of the visual rhetoric of a print text. Teachers so vehemently enforce the layout of a research paper, she argues, because it sets a tone of professionalism and clarity communicated to an audience through the physical arrangement of elements on a page (25). Although these examples emphasize the visuality of even traditional texts, not all scholars embrace the universal multimodality claim. Document design, asserts Wysocki, backgrounds visuality to foreground words; visual texts must primarily communicate information visually (Writing New Media 70).

Despite this caution at categorizing all texts as visual texts, these scholars demonstrate that attention to visuality can promote productive critiques and prompt considerations of aptness of mode.

After considering how models use multiple modes to communicate and support their messages, a second approach might have students develop hybrid visual-verbal texts that consider aptness of mode and draw on each mode’s strengths. McCloud explains that by working
in tandem, the two modes can enhance the overall message: “When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area” (157). He explains that if a picture provides all the necessary information for initial comprehension in a narrative, the possibilities for dialogue expand greatly (158). He explains that this can also work in reverse: “If the words lock in the ‘meaning’ of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off.” This is especially true in comics, as McCloud demonstrates in a frame-by-frame analysis of a comic strip (159). Barthes’ understanding of word/picture collaboration celebrates a similar possibility, doing work he categorizes as either relay or anchoring. In a relay partnership, one mode elaborates on the other by adding different or additional information. He names captions as an example of this collaboration. In an anchoring partnership, one mode confirms the previously established concept of the other, thereby specifying, restating, or stabilizing it (Kress and van Leeuwen, Reading Images 18). Rather than always positioning pictures and words as rivals, a more productive approach would encourage them to be occasional teammates.

A third approach might involve creating re-conceptualized versions of texts that utilize different modes, cater to different audiences, and operate in different contexts. For example, students could redesign a multiple page, word-based, print text into a multimedia text such as a slideshow or hyperlinked webpage, into a multimodal text appropriate for a billboard message or brochure, or into an audio public service announcement. Students would be challenged to rethink their mode in conjunction with purpose, audience, and context, rearranging the message to suit the constraints and affordances of the mode.

Despite the growing collection of textbooks boasting titles suggesting visual richness, many of these texts fall short of facilitating development of visually rich composing experiences. These textbooks employ pictures as catalysts or cues for writing but do not encourage students
themselves to deploy images to communicate meaning. While these textbooks encourage teachers to use pictures as writing cues—a pedagogically sound approach to generating invention—they often fail to place students in the empowering position of composers; instead students are relegated to the role of consumer, required to respond to another’s production. Steve Westbrook’s analysis categorizes the types of assignments included in Donald and Christine McQuade’s Seeing and Writing, Lester Faigley et al.’s Picturing Texts, and those of eight other texts, determining that only about five percent of all assignments position students as producers of visual texts—a determination that includes assignments requiring mere adjustments to font color and inserting pictures. That ninety-five percent of prompts position students as mere consumers affirms Elbow’s observation that reading is privileged (462). In these cases, just as Elbow observes that teachers often employ writing in the service of reading—“to summarize, interpret, explain, or make integrations and comparisons among readings” (“The War” 10)—so too is the use of pictures meant to reinforce the primacy of words. Yet, rather than restrict the productivity of images to the invention stage, might their potential for supporting students extend beyond the earliest writing stage? Rather than using pictures to prompt writing, might there be a pedagogical benefit to outputting pictures? Theorists suggest that the answer is yes. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that “we can no longer treat literacy (or ‘language’) as the sole, the main, let alone the major means for representation and communication. [...] Language and literacy now have to be seen as partial bearers only” (Literacy in the New Media Age 35). Rather than uniformly subjugate pictures to words, a productive critique should reiterate that each medium goes about its work in different ways.

***
Advocates for expanded literacy argue that just as both words and pictures communicate meaning in culture, society, and the workplace, so too must both words and pictures be available means of communication for students in schools. Rather than campaign for one communicative mode over the other, schools should teach students to consider aptness of mode for communicating a message. After introducing the emergence of multimodal composing, the next chapter will focus on the pedagogical soundness of cross-training assignments that engage students in thinking about aptness of mode for purpose, audience, and context.
Chapter Three: Visual Essays as Cross-Training Exercises

Just as exploring athletic pursuits other than running can benefit runners’ skills, agility, and balance, so too can exploring writing experiences outside the traditional essay benefit students when they return to traditional writing situations. The cross-trained writer will exhibit an expanded array of writing skills, flexibility in moving between modes of writing, and a more balanced understanding of writing and its applications in society. This chapter will borrow from multimodal and new media scholarship to explore the pedagogical benefits of and challenges to teaching compositions that specifically target visual and verbal modalities. As multimodal and new media products invite a mix of media for communicating meaning—including videos, images, and sounds—they foreground considerations of aptness of mode, a central question facing composers of visual compositions or compositions that integrate both visual and verbal elements.

The Essay: Coming of Age in the 21st Century

As many scholars point out, the technologies of this era have sparked new ways of communicating, popularized modes that rely heavily on visual aspects, and established new genres that contrast starkly with the prose-based essays traditionally taught in secondary Language Arts classrooms. A number of scholars have highlighted a gap between school-sponsored literacy practices and students’ everyday literacy practices as a crisis with which composition classrooms must contend. As rhetorician Collin Gifford Brooke warns, “Our disciplinary insistence on the printed page, if it persists unchecked, will slowly bring us out of step with our students, our institutions, and the broader culture of which we are a part” (23). In today’s classrooms, then, the clash between 19th-century-based school-sponsored writing and 21st century practices foregrounds a concern: if effective communication has assumed new forms,
must students learn new ways of making meaning? In other words, is the traditional academic essay in its dominant form still deserving of its privileged status in Language Arts curricula?

Emerging genres made increasingly available through technology include visual compositions that integrate images and words such as the visual essay, also called a visual multimedia essay. A multimedia essay mixes verbal, visual, and/or aural modes and assumes the shape of a CD-ROM, DVD, website, or printed poster, among others (Blakesley and Hoogenveen 386).

Although categorizing multimodal compositions such as the multimedia essay, the visual essay, or other similar genres—such as the photographic essay—as essays may seem to stretch the term’s definition too far, early understandings of the word essay imbued it with great potential for a range of applications. French Renaissance writer Miguel de Montaigne, “the father of the essay,” used the term essay originally to mean an attempt or experiment (Lopate 41). While formal education has mostly used the essay as a forum where students demonstrate their already achieved knowledge of a concept, essayists sharing Montaigne’s philosophy wrote to explore their thoughts and demonstrate their journeys toward understanding (Spellmeyer 114). As one scholar observed, “We want students to prove, not wonder” (Lynch 293). However, building on the ideas of composition scholars supportive of multimodal composing experiences, the visual essay may be one multimodal exercise through which students can once again be urged to wonder.

2 Ambiguity surrounds term visual essay. I use the phrase to denote a composition where both images and words contribute significantly to communicating meaning. Mitchell terms this type of composition where visual and verbal representation intersect (and neither assumes the privileged position) a photographic essay (287). I have avoided his term because I do not wish to suggest that the visual aspect of visual essays must be comprised of photographs. Richard Miller describes the visual essay as a “nonexistent genre” and instead uses visual multimedia essay in reference to a composition that integrates visual and verbal modes (149). I use the term visual essay because it foregrounds visuality while invoking the academic seriousness inherent in traditional print texts known generally as essays.
The ideas of composition theorists including Jody Shipka, Cynthia Selfe, and Tom Romano provide support for teaching visual essays because such genres challenge students to wonder rather than simply follow form templates. Traditional essay assignments have stipulated for students all the constraints, including the number of paragraphs or pages, the genre, and the mode. Such guidance can benefit students in many instances as they invent and organize their ideas, as well as support a teacher in defining expectations. In other instances, however, teachers may desire to engage students in genuine thinking about aptness of mode. Without direct instructions and default forms, then, students working through a visual essay are free to experiment with meaning-making and discover the communicative affordances presented by various technologies and their accompanying modes and genres. Examining the aptness of mode for purpose, audience, and context can teach students important lessons regarding which resources to use in particular circumstances, lessons absent in traditional essay assignments.

Shipka, who assigns a multimodal assignment in her first-year college courses, found that students were greatly challenged by this sudden freedom to make choices: “A multimodal task-based orientation requires a great deal from students, to be sure. Making the shift from highly prescriptive assignments to multimodal tasks is challenging for students unaccustomed to thinking about and accounting for the work they are trying to achieve in academic spaces” (“A Multimodal Task-based” 292). Shipka explains that students limited to the traditional verbal essay are excused from considering how the default constraints may be more or less suited to thinking about purpose, audience, and context. When assignments ask students to communicate a message but refuse to direct them in exactly how to do it, students must learn by doing and redoing. Students assigned a visual essay and challenged to communicate through both images
and words, for example, will have to negotiate between the two modes, experimenting with how and when each most effectively serves the assignment’s purpose, audience, and context.

Just as traditional assignments infrequently challenge students to think about aptness of mode, so too do traditional assignments often inhibit students from thinking about delivering and circulating their work. Most student compositions do not circulate beyond the student-to-teacher path. Students finish their written work, submit it to the teacher, and the teacher returns it with a grade. Selfe argues, however, that multimodal compositions often disperse more widely among students and their communities than do traditional essays. As Selfe explains, “These essays may appeal to different audiences who enjoy listening to the radio, watching television, or reading newspapers” (Multimodal Composition 34). Students are excited to share their work with audiences, and audiences share in this enthusiasm. For students familiar with the economy of a participatory culture, visual essays—especially those conducive to digital transmission—may find their way into the larger culture. As richly engaging texts, visual essays mesh easily with participatory culture’s democratic avenues to entry and propensity toward civic engagement.

Additionally, visual essays will engage students deeply in their subject matter. Selfe observes that students often exert extraordinary effort on their multimodal compositions, often begging for more time to polish the final product. Unlike their efforts toward traditional verbal essays, which students often see as finalized following the completion of a single draft, their efforts toward multimodal compositions seem never quite finished (100). Rebekah Shultz Colby and Richard Colby, who study the application of game theory in the composition classroom, explain such engagement. A good assignment, they speculate, engages students so deeply in their learning that it “crosses the boundaries between work and play.” Immersive games operate according to what they call an emergent pedagogy, meaning that games present puzzles that increase in difficulty
according to the gamer’s ability and evolve according to the gamer’s playing style. This pedagogy matches Lev Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development. Immersive assignments offer similarly progressing challenges that emerge from the students’ preceding composing choices. In composing a visual essay, for example, the images students choose may restrict, broaden, or otherwise complicate the ideas they present in words and vice-versa. Visual essays, offering students the chance to distribute meaning across visual and verbal modes according to their choosing, engage students in an emergent, captivating pedagogy where learning mirrors play. As occurs in game play, the difficulties of playful assignments unfold as the composition materializes, Colby and Colby explain, “creat[ing] a playful space that allows students to pursue their own discovery process and create their own challenging assignments” (305). While the thought of visual essays may conjure visions of hours spent editing digital videos or learning complex web design languages, composing visually need not involve complicated digital tools during production, delivery, and/or circulation. While some multimodal texts such as blogs, videos, and websites certainly utilize digital, web-based tools, visual essays need not work toward an electronically circulated text. Some technology-light, visual-heavy compositions may use standard software to produce slideshows or word processing applications to produce flyers, newsletters, or brochures. Instructors could spotlight the intersection of visual and verbal modes by assigning students to produce visual essays in the form of posters on traditional posterboard or as books or pamphlets using only paper-based materials (Selfe and Selfe, “Convince Me” 88). Still, as visual essays do often ask students to move beyond the verbal mode of communication, they will likely require more kinesthetic, hands-on student involvement than typical written essays, and with that, the potential challenges of access to space and materials.
Admittedly, such creative projects do not complement all students’ strengths or interests. Romano, however, makes a strong case for exposing all students to these alternatives modes of communication: “I want students with more conventional analytical minds to expand their cognitive repertoire and rhetorical skills by gaining further experience with narrative thinking, with knowing the world through story, poem, and song, through imagery, metaphor, and symbol” (56). He argues that students benefit intellectually and emotionally from such struggles, asserting that “no matter what professions they enter, fact and analysis are not enough” to ensure success in their future endeavors (57). Much like cross-training in the field of athletics will make many athletes uneasy by challenging them in areas outside their comfort zones, cross-training in the composition classroom may make many students—and instructors—uncomfortable, too. The key to guiding athletes and writers through this process is knowing—and making known—the rationale behind such assignments. Whereas coaches repeat to their runners adages such as “eyes on the prize,” so too should teachers begin with the end in mind. By establishing objectives and explicitly sharing them with students, teachers can more fully guide students toward achieving the objectives attainable through visual essays. Establishing clear objectives from the beginning will also help teachers during assessment at the project’s end.

Seeing Results: Concerns Regarding Assessment of Visual Essays

Since the visual essay lacks the quickly recognizable elements of a traditional essay—the thesis, reasons one, two, and three, and the closing—that high school teachers grade comfortably and efficiently, instructors who must assess visual essays face challenges of both unfamiliarity and ambiguity. Instructors often express conflicting views on what to assess and how to assess students’ visual compositions. Some assessors place more value on aesthetics or graphic design arrangement, while some maintain that the depth of ideas is key. Still others argue that the
shining through of a personal voice weighs more heavily in their assessments (Ferstle 70). One professor expressed his fears that his students were earning unjustified high grades as a result of underdeveloped critical faculties. “The thing was,” the professor confesses, “the work was so good, I had to give them all As” (qtd. in Shipka, “Negotiating” 352). Such a concession reaffirms critics’ worst fears: the concern for falling academic standards.

The difficulties in assessing these visual assignments stem from a variety of factors. Selfe and George cite a lack of teacher training in evaluating compositions in modes beyond traditional written communication. A lack of specific vocabulary for how visual elements communicate meaning, as identified by Kress and van Leeuwen, adds to the difficulty. Attributing the difficulties of assessing visual compositions to some inherent characteristic of the form or on a lack of vocabulary suggests that teachers can do little to remedy this problem on their own. Recent scholarship in composition and instructional design, however, provides teachers with a number of suggestions. Instructors including Yancey, Elbow, and Shipka propose that teachers avoid the assessment dilemma by assessing more than just final products. Educational consultants Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe offer an instructional planning strategy they term backwards design for teachers to use when planning lessons and units, which focuses on teachers defining objectives and assessment rubrics before planning instructional activities. Elbow offers another tactic for easing assessment concerns: thinking about assessment as more than grading.

Rather than solely assess the finished product, many educators ask students to include reflections on their work, which weigh heavily into the grade. Yancey argues that teachers should ask students to articulate the thinking behind a composition’s finished state through reflections, using students’ own stated objectives as a benchmark. “In a classroom situation, we can always ask for a reflection that speaks to the intent, which we can then use as a canvas against which to
plot effect” (“Looking” 97). Elbow, valuing the process more than the product, asks students to make the invisible work visible through a reflection activity he terms *Movies of the Reader’s Mind*. With this exercise, students share their understandings of purpose, audience, and context, thinking behind their decisions to cater to those factors, and the battles they faced while composing their product (“Trustworthiness in Evaluation” 229). Romano too invites his students to share with him the work and accomplishments their projects may not readily present to the evaluator, asking them to “inform me of invisibilities in their work” (169). Many scholars assert the pedagogical soundness of reflections as exercises through which “students become more sophisticated and flexible rhetoricians, able to describe and share with others the potentials and limitations of their texts” (Shipka, “Negotiating” 347). In short, these reflections should ask students to determine the composition’s objectives and explain how they believe they have met them. These reflections often account for a significant portion of the composition’s overall grade, equivalent or nearly equivalent to the weight of composing the visual product itself.

Those who skillfully implement and assess non-traditional compositions in their classrooms often succeed because they possess a clear vision of the goals and outcomes of the assignment. Clarifying to themselves and the students the purpose of the assignment from the start can alleviate later potential frustrations. Backwards design, according to Wiggins and McTighe, encourages instructors to define their objectives and determine their corresponding method of assessing those objectives before planning any activities. A teacher who aspires to evaluate students’ choices for aptness of mode, for example, must plan activities that address this objective and provide an assessment that encourages students to demonstrate their thinking behind their choices. Wiggins and McTighe’s motto, “Begin with the end in mind,” is taken from Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of High Effective People*. As Covey says, “To begin with the
end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you are going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction” (qtd. in Wiggins and McTighe 1). To comply with this advice, teachers should first identify the desired results of the assignment, including what tasks students should be able to do. Second, teachers should determine what evidence students must provide to demonstrate their knowledge. Only after teachers complete this inventory should they design the culminating assignment and the instruction leading to it. Wiggins and McTighe do not offer backwards design as a strategy specific for designing instruction for visual essays; however, just as teachers have a responsibility to be clear to themselves and their students about the goals of traditional assignment, so too may backwards design assist teachers with facilitating student instruction and establishing expectations for assessment.

Other educators who have successfully handled the assessment dilemma recognize that assessment need not always conclude in a summative grade that bears significant weight on the students’ overall course grade. Rather than assess visual essays as summative assessments that measure students’ progress at the end of a learning outcome, these theorists argue that assessment can be formative. Formative feedback allows instructors to make adjustments to the instruction working toward learning goals still in progress, and gives students an opportunity to employ that feedback in future summative assessments. Many scholars such as Geoffrey Sirc, Elbow, Selfe and others suggest the need for more informal, ungraded assignments. Sirc suggests that informal writing may be more important than formal writing: liberated from the threat of earning a poor grade due to experimentation, students are more likely to discover their own style and statements (“English Composition as a Happening II” 282). Elbow offers a valuable insight, distinguishing between evaluation and assessment: “‘Evaluation’ refers to two very different activities:
measurement (or grading or ranking) and commentary (or feedback).” He explains that both teachers and students conflate measurement and commentary, or uphold measurement—the grade—as the only important piece of commentary (“Trustworthiness in Evaluation” 231). Selfe suggests that what students learn about choices and options during these non-traditional formative assignments can be assessed in more traditional and traditionally assessed summative assignments (*Multimodal Composition* 100). These approaches to using visual exercises coincide with the learning goals of a cross-training approach to teaching writing, offering students opportunities to develop knowledge and skills that they can then apply during traditional writing experiences.

If teachers decide to adopt formative assessment for visual essays, Wysocki proposes that they consider peer evaluation. To encourage whole-class involvement in assessment, she suggests that instructors arrange the completed products around the room like a museum exhibit. The students circulate and respond on paper to each product, and then students can read the responses to their own work and respond to these questions: “What did most people interpret the argument to be? What aspects of the presentation stood out most for people, and how did that shape how they interpreted the argument? What expectations did people bring to their looking, expectations that helped shape how they responded?” (*Writing New Media* 39). Because this activity will increase circulation and delivery opportunities, students may be more motivated to do their best work. Fitting the present participatory culture, this activity will develop the classroom into a community of writers rather than individuals whose work is exchanged only with the teacher, cater to students’ conventional practices of sharing their work, and garner constructive commentary useful for future compositions.

**Cross-Training: Occasional and Strategic**

46
Critics have protested that projects such as a visual essay digress too far beyond the territory for which English and Language Arts teachers are responsible. They argue that multimodal assignments fail to teach the fundamental skills students will need in their college coursework, and that composition teachers should focus on words, sentences, and paragraphs. Proponents of multimodality share many of these concerns and thus reiterate that use of such compositions is occasional and strategic. As Romano affirms, “I’m not ready to toss out expository writing, even though my students responded with enthusiasm and emotion” to the non-expository writing (21). Nor should anyone embrace such uniformity, explains the NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies. An exclusive emphasis on visual essays would be just as problematic as total exclusion, detracting from students’ access to other modes of expression. Thus, proponents of multimodality call instead for a compromise, what Kevin Leander terms a parallel pedagogy. Leander’s classroom philosophy aligns closely with an athletic cross-training philosophy, emphasizing the importance of occasional and strategic engagements with alternative texts rather than universal adoption.

Leander identifies varying levels of instructor engagement with expanded literacies useful for teachers preparing to integrate visual composing exercises. While referring primarily to digital texts in the classroom, his analysis also describes a continuum of stances toward multimodality in the classroom, whether or not such products are digital. He categorizes responses into four common stances: resistance, replacement, return, and remediation. Teachers exhibiting a resistance stance positions themselves “squarely with conventional print literacy practices, including reading, interpreting, and writing print genres that have been valued in (and out) of school for generations, such as the novel, the academic argument, poetry, the research paper, and the like” (147). These teachers tend to harbor the most pervasive fears about delving into
expanded literacies. Directly opposing this group are those teachers occupying a replacement position. They acknowledge a gap between literacies traditionally taught in school and those circulating in broader culture. Thus, they advocate for replacing “dead genres” such as the novel, poem, and research paper with updated genres such as film analysis and blogging. These replacement-stance technophiliacs stand in direct opposition to the resistance-stance technophobics. Occupying the middle ground between these polarities, the return stance seems to embrace expanded literacies, but only when their production can be legitimated by more authoritative print supplements. For example, an assignment might ask students to produce an informal blog, but remain tethered to a print-based requirement such as a formal explanation or reflection (148). Leander terms as remediation the stance he promotes as most productive. This stance, based on the ideas first articulated by media theorists Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, argues that new forms should not simply replace old forms. Instead, new forms should remediate old forms by “include[ing] and embed[ding] their generic conventions, structures, and practices in new ways.” A remediation approach privileges no single medium, promoting instead a view that asks students to consider which mode might most appropriately respond to a given purpose, audience, and context (148).

This parallel pedagogy approach to teaching visual essays coalesces with Kress and van Leeuwen’s calls for thinking about aptness of mode, and it echoes Mitchell’s assertion in Picture Theory that the most valuable considerations will investigate the “difference the differences (and similarities) make” (90). Similar to an athletic coaching philosophy that advocates for cross-training, a parallel pedagogical philosophy promotes discussion and investigation into “how old and new literacy practices, including print texts and visual texts, may be fruitfully taught side by side, rather than the ‘old’ being a precursor to the new or being replaced by it” (Leander 149).
Albeit not to a restrictive degree, a parallel pedagogy advocates the preservation of traditional composing tasks while also developing students into well-rounded composers.

**Reaping the Benefits of Cross-Training**

A cross-training approach to compositions conceives of non-traditional experiences as benefiting students upon their return to traditional writing experiences. According to scholars such as Selfe and Shipka, multimodal experiences aim to teach students to make informed, deliberate choices about effective composing. Teachers guiding students through the visual essay composing process can encourage students to consider how these exercises can be transferred to and remediate their thinking about traditional written assignments.

Selfe’s and Shipka’s experiences with multimodal compositions provide support for a cross-training approach to teaching writing through visual composing exercises. Selfe argues that multimodal composing experiences can successfully teach students to consider these tools and their aptness for the circumstances. Experiences with multiple modes “can actually help them better understand the particular affordances of written language” (*Multimodal Composition* 9). Shipka confirms that her experience in assigning multimodal compositions has also reaped positive gains for students when they return to traditional compositions. She attributes her students’ increasingly process-minded understanding to their experiences with multimodal assignments: “I would not go so far as to say that my students’ [multimodal projects] are the most important of the texts they produce all semester, but they do substantially alter students’ production practices” (“Negotiating” 353).

In addition to cross-training students, George and Selfe indicate that offering students experiences in visual composing can also cross-train teachers. George argues that instructors have under-theorized the kinds of assignments that composition classrooms might involve (11),
and that “current discussions of visual communication and writing instruction have only tapped the surface of possibilities for the role of visual communication in the composition class” (12). To more fully grasp the potentialities of visual assignments, George argues that teachers must welcome visual assignments into their classes. Selfe too agrees that educators have something to gain that can only be attained through experiential learning. She asserts that teachers may be encouraged to think more deeply about writing and teaching writing through experiences in multimodality. She also explains that only when teachers are convinced of the value of these experiences will widespread curricular change become possible: “It is only teachers’ learning about new approaches to composing and creating meaning through texts that will catalyze changes in composition classrooms (Multimodal Composition 6). Reminding instructors that teaching is a practice that requires trial, error, and reflection, George and Selfe predict that teachers will improve their proficiency in teaching and assessing visual compositions only by willingly engaging with them and by critically reflecting on their teaching of production. Thus, George and Selfe recall the essay’s early identity as an exploratory journey, urging teachers—like their students—to experience the essay less as providing proof of understanding and more as a journey towards achieving understanding.

In addition to the pedagogical soundness of using visual compositions to approach academic goals, perhaps both students and teachers can experience another gain: building on the excitement of school-sponsored writing to rediscover the joy of writing outside of school. As Elbow says, “In my view, the best test of a writing course is whether it makes students more likely to use writing in their lives” ("Reflections on Academic Discourse" 136). By exploring a broader range of writing experiences, writing teachers introduce students to the many possible forms of expression and communication they might enjoy that otherwise they might have
overlooked. Just as cross-training introduces athletes in training for one field of competition to exercises they might enjoy when they are beyond that competition, so too can cross-training writers increase the likelihood that students will find writing a fulfilling means of communication for use in their lives beyond classroom schooling.
Chapter Four: Composing a Visual Personal Essay

The following chapter will outline an approach to teaching a visual essay conducive to use in the secondary Language Arts classroom. This project is modeled after that of the *New York Times*’ online digital media feature “One in 8 Million: New York Characters in Sound and Images,” an oral history project conducted throughout 2009. As students create visual personal essays about themselves, they will not only encounter the usual essay concerns including arrangement and focus but also the central concern of aptness of mode. By providing a project overview, possible objectives, a standards-aligned rationale, accompanying activities, and a prompt (Appendix), I illustrate how teachers can use this project and similar assignments to engage with both 21st century skills and traditional curricular goals.

**Project Overview**

Throughout 2009, a team of *New York Times* journalists profiled one New Yorker per week in a project they termed “One in 8 Million.” Producing short (two-to-three minutes, six to eight photographs) visual-audio portraits of ordinary New Yorkers, the journalists elegantly and intimately portrayed the everyday lives of the people they featured, subjects whose own voices narrate their stories. The team won an Emmy in 2010 for their photojournalistic work. As senior multimedia producer Sarah Kramer explains, the project strove to “build a bit of community” among the city’s residents and “make a rather vast place seem a bit smaller and more human.” Each of the fifty-four profiles—including the stories of a taxidermist, a grandfather, a teenage mother, a bus depot barber, and a wedding wardrober—depicts its subject from an angle that captures his or her identity. Yet, because online audiences often have short attention spans, each profile must capture a life without telling its subject’s whole life story. Kramer explains the resulting constraints involved in planning the narrative focus: “If you have three minutes, you
can only hit, probably at most, three notes, not even three topics, it’s like three building blocks. You can introduce one point, which layers on another point, which layers on another point.” She explains that successful profiles maintain a tight focus: “As soon as you try to give a whole biography or autobiography, of somebody in three minutes, then you’re failing.” The story, she says, “should be nuanced and it should be surprising and it should have tension. It should have elements that make a good story” (Estrin). Like a personal essay that students might compose in a high school English class, these profiles reveal the personal philosophies or core values that each individual lives by, offering a visually enhanced peek into their unique human experiences.

Like many personal essay assignments, this visual personal essay assignment challenges students to craft a response that tells their story in their own words from a nuanced angle—yet unlike typical essays, their words will not assume all of the narrative responsibility. Instead, the students will allocate some meaning to be visually transmitted to the audience through the use of photographs. As classroom equipment and other institutional structures may vary in how closely they permit students to mirror the NYT exemplars, the project’s objectives center not so much on the specific form assumed by the final product or its distribution (i.e., digital film short posted online, slideshow on a CD ROM), but instead encourage students to think beyond the traditional strict reliance on words. While the project is conductive to the use of new media³, final versions could assume a variety of material forms, including printed posters, zines or journals, and circulate via in-class oral presentation, classroom exhibitions, or a class access-protected website.

³ While this version of my project limits the use of digital technology in anticipation that many classrooms lack access to such resources, instructors can cater this project to meet the opportunities available to their student population. For classrooms with access to the necessary technology (such as computers with microphones) and digital software (such as Microsoft Power Point, Windows MovieMaker, or other applications supporting slideshow production), students could produce digital visual-audio essays. Instructors could further adapt this project to utilize hypertext, foregrounding the photographs and offering the text upon demand through hyperlinks.
Since students may be unfamiliar with thinking about aptness of mode and the ways in which visual texts transmit meaning, studying model texts is a key step in this project. While instructing students in how to analyze images and other multimedia closely relates to this project’s concern for visuality, a wealth of scholarship on this topic exists. Therefore, while I briefly discuss the importance of close-reading some images included in “One in 8 Million” profiles, I do not focus on how specific aesthetic strategies create meaning. I focus instead on how compositions transmit meaning through multiple modes and in doing so, how they foreground the issue of aptness of mode. Although students may conceivably be constructing visual personal essays lacking the digital aspects of these exemplars, the NYT portraits are particularly fitting models for students to study before and during the process of composing their own visual essays, because they raise considerations relevant to this assignment’s concerns for multimodality.

The spotlight these portraits place on issues of audience and authorship further bolsters the rationale for using them as models. They depict the daily lives of ordinary people for a public audience who have likely neither heard of the person nor ever will again. Though students may see their own lives as mundane, these portraits insist that the carefully crafted stories of even the most average lives can be compelling narratives. Thus, students can see themselves as worthy subjects for a story. Additionally, just as the featured subjects in the model texts tell the stories in their own voices, so too will students’ voices narrate their essays from their first-person point of view. Students should observe that the stories speak for themselves, needing no reporter’s commentary to articulate a moral theme or concluding kicker. Furthermore, like the students, the journalists face deadlines and other constraints in their production. For example, sometimes the portraits center on past events in a subject’s life, and the journalists are challenged to capture

---

4 See Richard D. Zakia’s *Photographic Composition: A Visual Guide* for aesthetic design concerns relating to photographic composition, such as the use of contrast, S-curves, point of view, and lighting.
images of the subject in the present that appropriately mesh with the subject’s telling of the past. Instructors aware of their population’s circumstances can determine whether students may use photographs from the past, if they would prefer students to work in teams and photograph each other specifically for this project, or if students must reappropriate photos from other sources.

The NYT portraits offer a further benefit as models: their brevity. While autobiographical, the essays’ short durations maintain a tight focus for each narrative. The composers simply cannot portray a subject’s entire life in two or three minutes. Instead, each visual essay captures the individual from a unique and focused angle, concentrating on a particular aspect of his or her life. This not only models strong content-driven narration, but also allows teachers to present a broad variety of examples in a short period of time.

Project Goals and Alignment with National Standards

I have argued throughout this thesis that non-traditional composing experiences can enhance students’ thinking about traditional composing demands. This section highlights goals and standards appropriate for this non-traditional visual essay assignment that also address traditional curricular goals and national standards. The following lists compile only some of the potential goals and standards that instructors might seek to meet through a visual essay, proving that crossovers relevant to both non-traditional and traditional composing experiences exist.

Goals:

---

5 Although many visual essay assignments may offer students an opportunity to take their own photographs, teachers need not require this of students. While students’ own photographs seem a valuable detail for something such as a photographic essay in the personal essay style, repurposing may work nearly as effectively for other tasks. Students could borrow images from a number of resources, including magazines and electronic sources. Such repurposing also invites teachers to address the ethical demands of borrowing images, a topic conventionally addressed only with borrowed print-based information.

55
Instructors interested in implementing this project or one similar to it could expand on or otherwise revise these goals to suit their curricula, their instructional purposes, and other objectives. I propose that potential goals could include:

- Students will demonstrate an awareness of audience by composing a visual essay with content appropriate for a diverse population of viewers.
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of focus by crafting a narrative scope fitting the limitations of this genre.
- Students will apply their understandings of aptness of mode by allocating narrative responsibility to the appropriate mode(s) of communication.
- Students will identify the choices they have made and justify them throughout the composing process.

**Alignment with NCTE and IRA Standards**

A visual essay assignment can also meet the widely used and well-established national English/Language Arts standards. I highlight some standards that validate the use of multimodal experiences in the composition classroom, standards that can be aligned specifically to visual essay assignments. A visual essay assignment similar to the “One in 8 Million” assignment meets the following English Language Arts standards established by the National Council for Teachers of English and the International Reading Association:

- **Standard 4**: “Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g. conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.”
- **Standard 5**: “Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.”
- **Standard 6**: “Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.”
Recommended Activities

In an effort to maintain a cross-training approach to teaching a visual essay, this section suggests some activities that foreground the cross-training benefits offered by the visual composing experience. In addition to guiding students through the potentially unfamiliar visual composing experience, these activities highlight the relationship between non-traditional composing experiences and traditional composing experiences. They aspire to explicitly address how experiences with the visual essay can inform students’ thinking about future written compositions. Instructors could integrate these activities before and during the composing experience.

The following activities boast cross-training potential. Their objectives include guiding students to: determine the conventions of a genre; evaluate the efficacy of content, structure, and mode; develop an appropriate narrative scope or focus; recognize the strengths and limitations of visual and verbal communicative modes; consider the complexities of invention; develop the classroom into a community of writers; and promote conscious awareness of the factors driving their composing decisions. These activities can be conducted in any order fitting the instructors’ purposes.

• To introduce students to the genre:

Use model texts to introduce students to this potentially unfamiliar hybrid genre of the visual essay. Students should consider how visual essays use multiple modes to construct meaning effectively. While modeling this project after that of the NYT project offers instructors access to a broad range of examples, an instructor could also use additional print-based autobiographical
texts, including memoir poetry and prose texts that integrate photographs. By comparing print-based texts to these hybrid models, students could compile possible conventions of personal visual essays. Instructors might term this as asking the students to infer the “requirements” or “expectations” that the NYT composers aimed to achieve.

- To consider the affordances of each mode:

Play the NYT visual essays on mute to focus specifically on how the images themselves are not mute: they too provide important content and context for the narrative. Ask students to list the details that the photojournalists’ pictures focus on in their photographs and explain their influence on the audience. For example, students could discuss why a photograph focuses on a hand or a rack of dresses. Then, obscuring the corresponding images, play only the voice-overs to focus specifically on the limitations of verbal language. This exercise can be helpful whether students will be taking their own photographs, choosing from a collection, or even repurposing since each task challenges them to consider what meaning an image can portray. Teachers might also ask students to discuss the black-and-white style photographs. What is the tone of such photographs? How does that tone fit the purpose, audience, and context of these visual essays?

- To examine the narrative structure and narrative constraints of visual essays:

Particularly as students prepare to compose the essay or voiceover, instructors should urge students to consider how they will set the scene: What background information should be provided for the audience to be quickly and efficiently introduced to the subject and setting? Consider how each visual essay maintains its timelessness, giving no indication of being outdated despite having been composed months or years ago.

- To consider how the modes work in tandem:

Examine the relationship between meaning communicated through images and meaning
communicated through words in the NYT visual essays. Could the pictures have been organized differently without changing the information in the voiceover? Consider listening only to the information given during the duration of a single photograph. What information not given aurally does the photograph deliver visually? Discuss the losses or gains possible if the visual essays had been crafted monomodally.

- To promote process-based thinking toward composing:

Instructors might provide students with a copy of an interview with the “One in 8 Million” producers. The producers discuss the journalists’ general composing approaches, which explains that the hybrid portraits evolved neither simply from the images nor simply from the subject’s commentary; instead, each visual essay’s final form emerged from the collaboration of images and words. This activity affirms that content can emerge from experience of creating, rather than simply filling a pre-established form.

- To broaden the circulation of texts and generate feedback:

Reserve a class period for a museum exhibit walk as suggested by Wysocki (Writing New Media 39) or a visual essay screening day. Additionally, display these products somewhere in the community or school (with student and parent/guardian permission, if students’ faces are depicted in photographs). This activity seeks to replicate the benefits of participatory culture that students are familiar with by expanding the audience of the compositions beyond that of a teacher. As a result, students’ work will garner more diverse feedback and direct engagement with their audiences.

- To encourage awareness of composing choices throughout the production process:

Include reflective writing assignments throughout the production process that specifically ask students to address the factors driving their choices. As rhetorician Jennifer Sheppard says,
“Often, students (and practitioners) get so wrapped up in the activities of development that they fail to recognize the critical and complex work they are actually undertaking” (129). Not only must teachers see these experiences as cross-training exercises applicable across a wide range of writing experiences, but also students must know they are honing skills they will be expected to call on in the future.

**Visual Essay as Cross-Training Exercise: Anticipated Learning Goals**

In an effort to advocate for the visual essay as a cross-training exercise, this section discusses possible benefits students will reap upon their return to traditional writing tasks. While traditional writing assignments will likely require students to compose only in words, I suggest some ways in which visual composing exercises will enhance students’ thinking toward these word-based tasks.

The visual essay can encourage students to critically consider the limitations of verbal communication. After tapping into the power of visuality to support the verbal aspects of their essays, students should be urged to accommodate for this lack of visuality upon returning to traditional compositions that rely only on verbal expression. Instructors should ask students to consider what a photograph would add to their written composition, and urge students to employ supportive verbal description to its fullest potential. Without the flexibility to draw upon multiple resources for making meaning, students should understand that they must compensate for these restrictions when they write.

This assignment also urges students to understand that non-verbal aspects of a composition can communicate meaning. Even while traditional writing assignments restrict their content to words on a page, students should account for the impact of document design and presentation. Instructors should ask students to consider the variety of tools available to them
through word processing applications and the ways in which those tools can inhibit or enhance their content. During a research paper unit, for example, teachers could guide students to see how adhering to MLA formatting meets the genre’s conventions and a discipline’s expectations, garnering credibility for the writer. In other words, the document design of an MLA-formatted essay serves as a visual indicator that a text’s author aspires to be taken seriously.

The visual essay could also assist students in thinking critically about the arrangement of their ideas. Whereas familiar genres such as a five-paragraph essay provide students with a ready-made organizational structure, the less familiar visual essay genre can challenge students to more fully engage with arrangement. Slides may be approached like paragraphs, but can also demonstrate the impact that re-arrangement can have on the reading experience. Instructors can guide students to see that just as each slide in the visual essay communicated a specific idea separate from, though related to, each of the others, so too are verbal essays organized into paragraphs and/or sections. However, instructors can rearrange the slides and ask students for their feedback, proving that changing the order of the pictures alters the audience’s viewing experience. Additionally, instructors can guide students to understand that arrangement should reflect deliberate choices rather than the order in which they conceived of ideas. Just as the photographs may not have been taken in the order they ended up in, so too do writers sometimes initially articulate ideas in an order that is later uprooted and reorganized. Thus, instructors can emphasize to the students that they should arrange their paragraphs with an understanding of how arrangement will impact readers.

This experience might also alter students’ expectations of invention. If students were urged to allow their ideas to emerge from the ongoing process of writing and photographing during the visual essay experience, teachers could help students think more deeply about the relationship
between content and form upon their return to the traditional essay. Rather than conceive of essays as “empty, preexisting containers to be filled” (Brooke 25), students might approach invention as an emergent, exploratory journey that persists and shifts content as the their compositions develop beyond the earliest writing stages. Additionally, just as photographers must find fresh ways to attract interest in old subject matter, so too must writers make adjustments to their content to cater to an audience and attract their interests. Sontag explains that photographs of even the same subject matter can be interesting because they differ according to the photographer’s choices. As she says, “People quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what’s there but of what an individual sees” (88). She explains that a photographer’s responsibility includes not just finding interesting subject matter, but creating interest out of even ordinary subject matter through “visual decisions” (89). Composition teacher Warren Westcott’s approach to teaching writing seems to draw on this same concept. He explains to his students how photographers, like writers, make choices as they progress. By giving them a camera and informing them of all the choices they have including subject, perspective or angle, selective focus, and arrangement of multiple photographs, students come to understand that it is choices that comprise a composer’s style (49). Seeing their ideas as offering nothing new to the topic, students may be discouraged from investing in their writing. Instead, the visual essay can contribute to students’ understanding that style also greatly contributes to their composition’s originality.

Offering students an opportunity to focus on the composing parallels between writing and photography could also expand students’ understanding of writing as a process. As Elbow explains, because the reading selections that teachers most often use in their classroom are
finished products, students come to believe that good writers simply write well without effort. If students were more often exposed to professionals’ pieces in their unfinished forms, they might come to better understand that writing is a process (“The War” 14). Wescott summons photographs and the process of photography to facilitate his process-oriented approach to teaching writing. He explains, for example, how photographic snapshots are similar to first drafts. “They are the photographic equivalent of writing notes or making quick journal entries to preserve experiences in an easy, economical way,” he states. He also highlights the role that photographing and reviewing those photographs can have in fine-tuning content. He explains that as in photography in writing “sometimes the relationships of all aspects of the subject are important, but often only one specific topic deserves most of the attention” (50). Targeting the issue of focus, he explains that the concept of cropping and framing can assist students with writing more concisely about a subject. He concludes by summarizing the impact that studying photography as a process can have on students’ writing processes: “Good pictures, like good writing, do not just happen by accident, and the very best learning occurs when students are allowed to work through the photographic process themselves” (53). Engaging with the visual essay and its components can alter students’ expectations of writing, reinforcing that learning to write well is a process.

As a composition conducive to display and sharing, the visual essay helps establish a culture of peer-to-peer engagement in the classroom. Replicating this aspect of participatory culture in the classroom environment may generate not only excitement among students and teachers alike but also valuable feedback. While assignments often circulate only within the limited student-to-teacher exchange, this experience might assist instructors in creating a community of writers within their own classrooms or schools. Students who enjoyed the feedback and engagement
with their peers and other audiences could be encouraged to maintain this practice with other assignments.

Finally, the visual essay aspires to equip students with fluency across multiple media, preparing them to navigate seamlessly as both audiences and composers. When students do encounter opportunities to choose among a variety of communicative modes, whether those opportunities are school-sponsored or self-sponsored, they will know to consider the suitability of content and the affordances of each mode for their intended audiences. Given opportunities to critically consider how they can utilize multiple modes in rhetorically purposeful and meaningful ways, they are less likely to succumb to thoughtlessly using such tools. By inviting students to experiment with visual decision making and guiding them to craft visually effective compositions, teachers equip students with the tools necessary for composing in a visual culture.

**Other Visual Cross-Training Assignments**

While this chapter focused on the visual essay’s ability to accomplish the goals fulfilled by a personal essay, the expectations of a visual essay can be adjusted to parallel those of multiple essayistic genres. The visual essay may be particularly conducive to the personal essay and autobiographic writing, for both—like photography—are associated with memory (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 289). Students could create self-portraits, choosing to emphasize particular characteristics of themselves or features of their lives (Ruszkiewicz et al. 81). Other instructors have linked the visual essay to the persuasive mode. The authors of *Picturing Texts* ask students to determine “how various modes might inhibit or facilitate the dissemination” of a public service message addressing a contemporary social issue (563). As students often receive an abundance of information visually through webpages, television, and other texts such as magazines, so too could teachers invite students to write informatively through the photo essay.
Another assignment in *Picturing Texts* charges students with creating an original postcard for a place they know well, informing an unknown audience about the place as fully as possible in the postcard form. As is the case with many of these assignments, the students are also required to explain their goals and evaluate themselves (143). Finally, the visual essay could explicitly challenge students to consider the affordances of different modes, particularly the gains and losses accumulated when texts shift from one mode to another. For example, students could take a well-known novel or short story and convert it into a photo essay, or reverse that process and retell their own or another artist’s photo essay as a prose text (Ruszkiewicz et al. 70). By determining the assignment’s objectives ahead of time, teachers can craft the visual essay prompt to fit their purposes while still preparing students to be effective communicators in a visual, participatory culture.

**The Final Stretch**

A cross-training approach does not suggest that adding pictures to writing makes students better writers. It is instead the objective-driven activities, experiential learning, and guided reflection that will facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills transferable to future tasks. Cross-training activities involving visuality can help teachers reach students where they are, cultivate critical thinking skills, and equip students with expanded literacy skills necessary for the 21st century most successfully when teachers know their objectives and students know there is a pedagogical purpose involved in these activities. Through the visual essay and other similar cross-training exercises, students will gain the necessary skills for assuming roles as producers in this visual, participatory culture surrounding them.
Appendix: Assignment Sheet

**A Visual Personal Essay**

Throughout this unit, we will focus on the issue of aptness of mode, specifically addressing the affordances of visual and verbal modes of communication. As we review a variety of visual essay examples from the award-winning *New York Times* project “One in 8 Million,” pay attention to how the visual and verbal modes each contribute to transmitting meaning and how they work together. Your mission is to craft a brief visual personal essay that considers aptness of mode and captures your life from a unique and focused angle. Like the NYT profiles, yours too should incorporate photographs and words. You need not construct a digital media product. You may integrate your pictures and words however you choose (poster, album, slideshow, etc.).

**Considering Content for the Visual Personal Essay**

Recall that a senior editor involved in the project cautions, “As soon as you try to give a whole biography or autobiography of somebody in three minutes, then you're failing.” In pursuing similar goals, be sure to focus in on a main idea or theme that captures some specific yet defining aspect of your identity, rather than makes sweeping generalizations about your life. Then, consider the essential parts of your story. Recall this advice: “It should be nuanced and it should be surprising and it should have tension. It should have elements that make a good story.” First, consider the setting the scene: what background information must you provide to the audience to quickly introduce yourself? Then, as your ideas develop, consider this: where does the tension come in? Finally, plan to provide some closure.

**Which Came First? The Photographs or the Story?**

From reading the interview with the producers, we learned that the content for each profile emerged from a combination of planned and spontaneous contributions. While the journalists began with rough ideas for a story that suggested possible photographs for them to capture, they also allowed the photographs and photographing experience to influence the story’s ultimate narrative. Similarly, you should brainstorm a few angles and envision corresponding photos, but be open to the possibility that actual experience of capturing those photographs may influence your narrative direction. Remember also that your photographs will be expected to carry some of the narrative responsibility. Thus, your photographs will likely require some planning and retaking. As you compose, consider why and how you chose each photograph, including the objects and places depicted.

**Considering Aptness of Mode**

As you choose your photographs and refine your ideas, consider how you will employ both visual and verbal modes in communicating meaning. Sometimes, the visuals may assume more responsibility, and other times, your words may carry the most weight. Your images and words should also work together, though not necessarily duplicate their messages. Consider the following questions as you compose, and later, as you reflect: In what instances do the images communicate more information than the words? In what instances do the words communicate more information than the pictures?

***Successful essays will 1) effectively communicate meaning using aptness of mode and 2) skillfully work within the narrative constraints of this assignment. Your final product should utilize four to six photographs, be narrated in first person point-of-view, and reflect deliberate choices in composing.***

***Note that this assignment also involves reflections throughout the process and after the completion of the process. Successful written reflections will address the choices behind your work in detail, so you may wish to keep your notes in anticipation of this component.***
Bibliography


Williams, Bronwyn T. “Leading Double Lives: Literacy and Technology in and out of School.”


---. “‘Tomorrow Will Not Be Like Today’: Literacy and Identity in a World of Multiliteracies.”

