

Writer/Designer

A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects

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What Are Multimodal Projects?

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Academic essays, biology posters, statistical PowerPoint presentations, lolcats . . . what do all of these texts have in common? They are all **multimodal**.

The word *multimodal* is a mash-up of *multiple* and *mode*. A *mode* is a way of communicating, such as the words we're using to explain our ideas in this paragraph or the images we use throughout this book to illustrate various concepts. *Multimodal* describes how we combine multiple different ways of communicating in everyday life.

For instance, lolcats, a well-known Internet meme, are multimodal. They combine photographs of cats with words written in humorously incorrect grammar to create a text that uses both visuals and language—*multiple modes*—to be funny.

You might be saying to yourself, "Wait, is a lolcat really a text?" Yes. **Text** traditionally means written words. But because we want to talk about the visuals, sounds, and movement that make up multimedia, we use the term *text* to refer to a piece of communication as a whole. A text can be anything from a lolcat to a concert tee shirt to a dictionary to a performance.

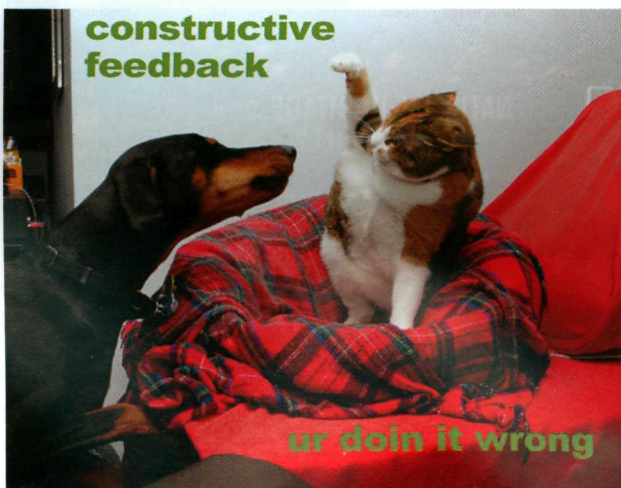


Figure 1.1 Lolcats Are Multimodal

This book will give you the multimodal tools to do it right!

CHAPTER 5: WEB-BASED MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION PRACTICES

Overview: Producing Layers of Meaning

When a user is first introduced to the powerful graphics program Photoshop, two of its most basic components of this software one learns to use are the layers and the opacity features. With layers, instead of existing on the same flat, two-dimensional plane,



Figure 1: Photoshop's workspace and layer palette

Photoshop allows the user to create separate layers that are stacked one on top of the other and arranged on the main canvas or workspace where an image is created. When a layer is on a higher level than another and in the same location on the canvas, it will block out what is on the layer underneath.

In the picture to the left, for example, layer two, the green dog, is on top in the stacking order (in the menu on the right) and so blocks out the blue bone that is on the layer underneath it (on both the canvas and in the stacking menu). However, an opacity slider (upper right corner of the layer stacking menu, shown in Figure Two) allows the user to lower the color saturation on layers so that if she chooses, she can fade out the color value on a layer so that what lies below can become visible. The trick in using the opacity slider is to lighten the layer enough for the object below to be recognizable without completely distorting

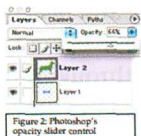


Figure 2: Photoshop's opacity slider control

Figure 1.2 A Dissertation Is a Multimodal Text

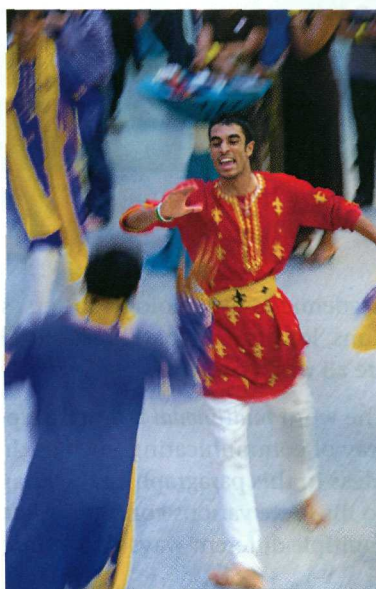


Figure 1.3 A Performance Is a Multimodal Text

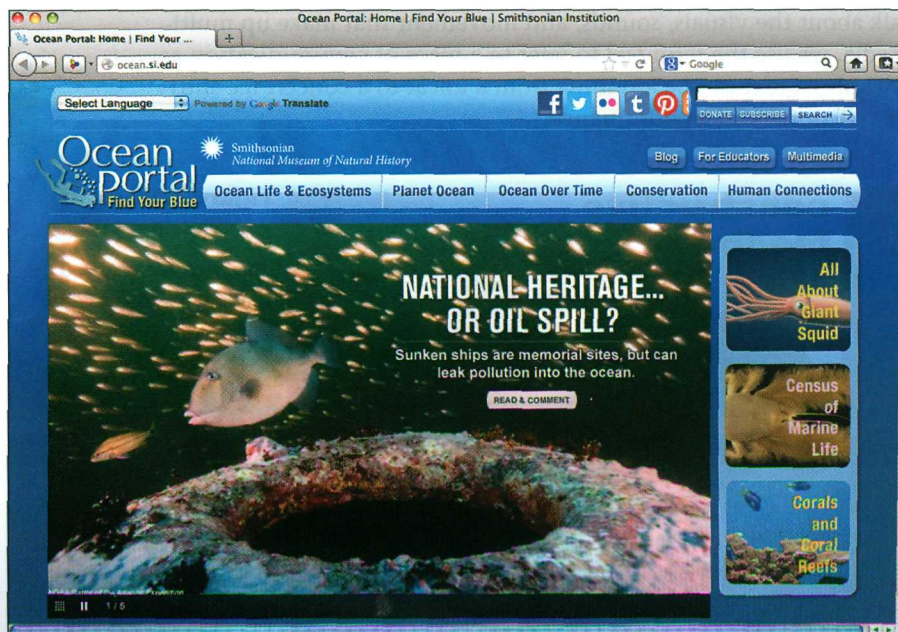


Figure 1.4 A Web Site Is a Multimodal Text

Writers choose modes of communication for every text they create. For example, the author of a lolcat chooses the cat photo (usually based on what is happening in the photo and whether that action might make for a good caption) and decides where to place the caption on the photo and what color and typeface to use for the caption. Sometimes these choices are unconscious, like when an author uses Microsoft Word's default typeface and margins when writing a paper for class. To produce a successful text, writers must be able to consciously use different modes both alone and in combination with each other to communicate their ideas to others.

The Modes: How Do They Work?

All kinds of texts are multimodal: newspapers, science reports, advertisements, billboards, scrapbooks, music videos—the list is endless. Consider, for example, all of the modes at play in a simple TV

Are All Texts Multimodal?

We said that multimodal texts are made up of multiple ways of communicating; for example, a multimodal text such as a lolcat might combine words and pictures to make meaning. So what about something like a research paper, which is mostly words? Is that a multimodal text?

The answer is yes! Let's take **Figure 1.2** as an example. It might seem that an audience could understand this text's argument just by reading the written words. In fact, to understand the full message being communicated in the text, the audience has to make sense of other elements as well. They must also look at the images and read the captions that explain what the images contain. The format of the text—a single column of black printed words on a white background, with a margin on either side—also tells the audience something important: that this text is probably an academic work of some kind. (In fact, it's a page from Jenny's dissertation.) Knowing what kind of text it is will influence the way the audience reads it.

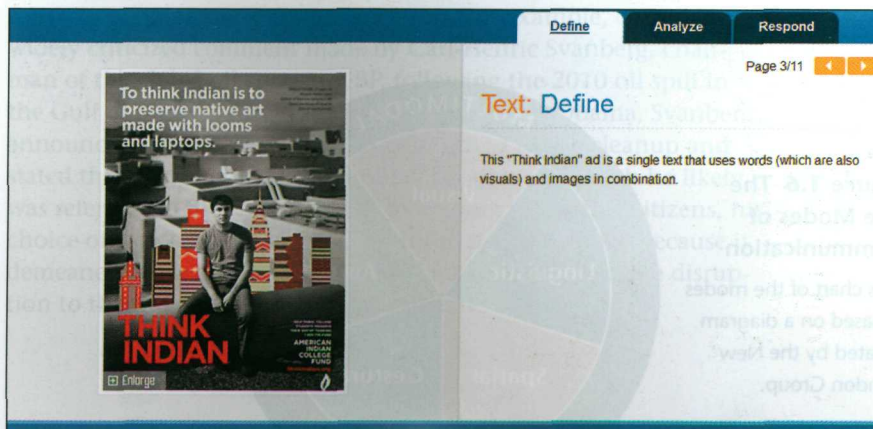


Figure 1.5 ix: visualizing composition: Text

What are multimodal texts and how do they function? Work through this interactive discussion of text using multimodal principles. Visit bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner to complete this tutorial.

Are All Multimodal Texts Digital?

Multimodal texts don't have to be digital. The dissertation in **Figure 1.2** was created on a computer but then was printed and bound into a book copy for the library. No matter whether a text is created on a computer, on paper, or in some other technology, writer/designers can still use the multiple combinations of words, photos, color, layout, and more to communicate their information.

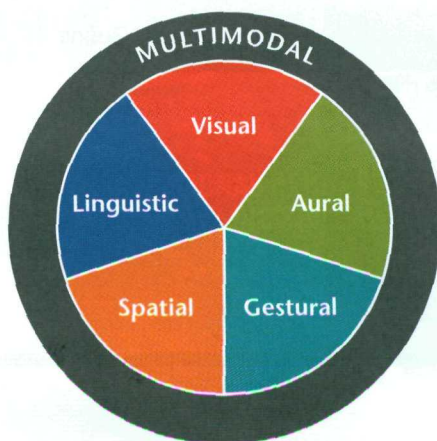
commercial—there usually is music, the voice of an announcer, video showing the product, text on the screen giving you a price or a Web address, and often much more. Each of these modes plays a role in the advertiser's argument for why you should buy its product. The music is selected to give the product a certain feel (young and hip, perhaps, or safe and reliable). The gender of the announcer and the tone, volume, and other qualities of his or her voice reflect whom the advertiser is trying to reach. The choice of whether to use video or animation, color or black and

white, slow motion or other special effects, are all deliberate *modal* considerations based on what the advertiser is trying to sell and to whom. Although each mode plays a role in the overall message, it is the combination of modes—the *multimodality*—that creates the full piece of communication.

To help you think through the different modes that may be present in a multimodal text, we're going to introduce you to five terms from the work of the New London Group, a collection of education and literacy scholars who first promoted the concept of multimodal literacies. They outlined five modes of communication—linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial—which they found could be

Figure 1.6 The Five Modes of Communication

This chart of the modes is based on a diagram created by the New London Group.



applied to all texts. The next section will help you better understand how these individual modes work.

Linguistic Mode

The linguistic mode refers to the use of language, which usually means written or spoken words. When we think about the ways the linguistic mode is used to make or understand meaning, we can consider:

- word choice
- the delivery of spoken or written text
- the organization of writing or speech into phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc.
- the development and coherence of individual words and ideas

While these aren't the only possibilities for understanding how the linguistic mode works, this list gives you a starting place from which to consider how words and language function. And although we've listed it first—and though it's the mode you probably have the most practice with—the linguistic mode is not always the most important mode of communication. (Whether it is or not depends on what other modes are at play in a text, what kind of text it is, and many other factors.)

The linguistic mode and the ability to use it carefully matter very much in contemporary communication. For example, consider a widely criticized comment made by Carl-Henric Svanberg, chairman of the global oil company BP, following the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After meeting with President Obama, Svanberg announced that his company was committed to the cleanup and stated that BP “care[s] about the small people.” Although he likely was referring to BP’s commitment to helping individual citizens, his choice of words—“small people”—infuriated the public because it demeaned those impacted by the spill and implied that the disruption to their lives was not of great concern.

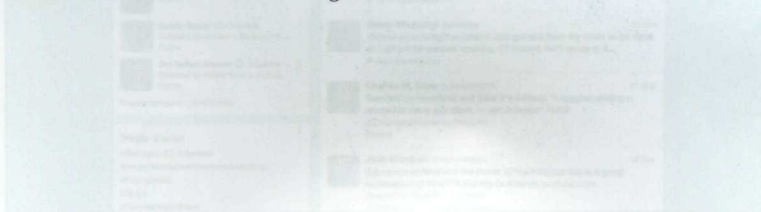


Figure 1.8 Jenny Sheppard's tweet

Process!

In 2011, Danielle E. Sucher created an extension for the Chrome Web browser called Jailbreak the Patriarchy, to wildly mixed reviews. This extension “genderswaps” all pronouns and gendered words, replacing “him” with “her,” “mother” with “father,” and so on. Try making this switch yourself by rewriting the linguistic content on your favorite Web site (or run a Web search for the add-on and install it). What linguistic choices do you notice? Are there any word choices or phrasings that you feel are particularly effective or ineffective? If so, which ones and why? How does genderswapping pronouns make you feel? What are some possible critiques of such a switch?

Visual Mode

The visual mode refers to the use of images and other characteristics that readers see. Billboards, flyers, television, Web sites, lighted advertising displays, even grocery store shelves bombard us with visual information in an effort to attract our attention. We can use this mode to communicate representations of how something looks or how someone is feeling, to instruct, to persuade, and to entertain, among other things. The visual mode includes:

- color
- layout
- style
- size
- perspective

These Twitter profiles (Figs. 1.7 and 1.8) have a lot of words (the linguistic mode), but their visual mode—the colors, layout, profile pictures, and logo—plays a big role in how users read and understand each page.



Figure 1.7 Kristin Arola's Twitter Feed



Figure 1.8 Jenny Sheppard's Twitter Feed

Process!

Look closely at the visual mode in the Twitter profiles shown in **Figures 1.7 and 1.8**, or go online to check out two of your friends' Twitter profiles. What visual differences do you see between the profiles? Do these differences shape your understanding of the person behind each profile? What do you assume he/she is like? What do you assume he/she uses Twitter for? Do you have a Twitter profile? What visual template did you choose, and why?

Aural Mode

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

- music
- sound effects
- ambient noise/sounds
- silence
- tone of voice in spoken language
- volume of sound
- emphasis and accent

Although most of us are used to hearing sound all around us every day, we don't often pay attention to how it signals information, including feelings, responses, or needed actions. It's easy to conceive how a spoken message communicates, but what about the increasingly tense background music in a TV drama, or the sounds that let us know when a computer is starting up? Whether big or small, each of these aural components conveys meaning. The opening theme song for *The Colbert Report*—a satirical news program on Comedy Central—famously ends with the screech of a bald eagle, but this eagle isn't the patriotic, feel-good symbol that the bald eagle is typically presented as in the United States. This ironic usage of the eagle supports the comedic tone of the program, in which Colbert pretends to be a conservative pundit.

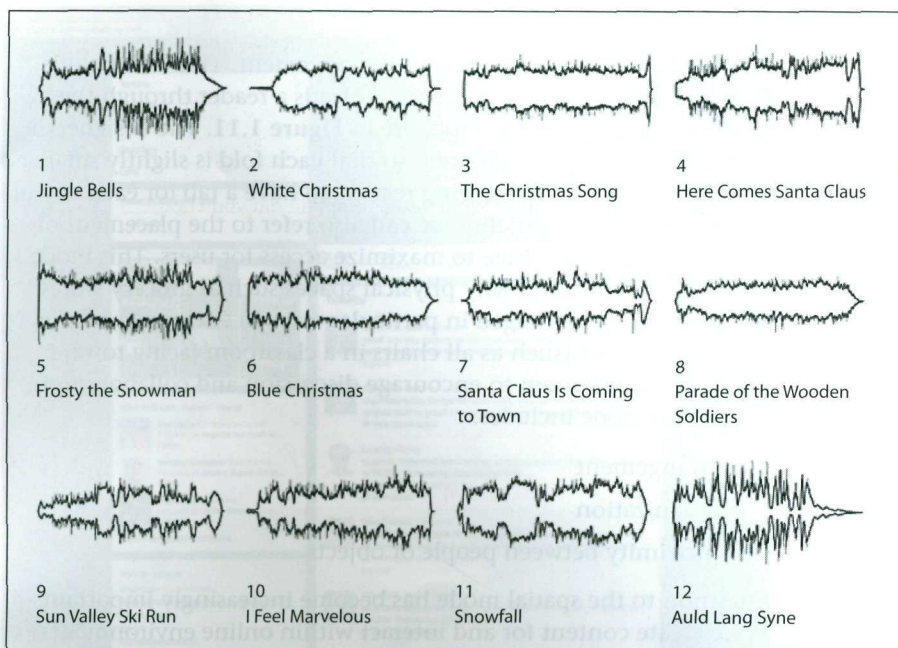


Figure 1.9 Graphic Comparison of Christmas Song Waveforms

Audio can also have visual aspects, as these representations show.

Watch this short video. What aural modal elements do you hear? What effect do these have on the tone of the piece? How would the tone of the video change if a country or bluegrass song were playing in the background? Visit bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner to watch this video.

Process!

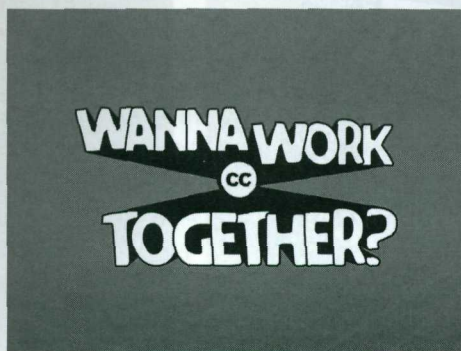


Figure 1.10 *Wanna Work Together?* by Creative Commons

Spatial Mode

The spatial mode is about physical arrangement. This can include how a brochure opens and the way it leads a reader through the text. For example, see the brochure in **Figure 1.11**. The designer created this conference program so that each fold is slightly smaller than the one below it, allowing readers to have a tab for each day of presentations. The spatial mode can also refer to the placement of navigation on a Web page to maximize access for users. This mode helps us to understand why physical spaces such as grocery stores or classrooms are arranged in particular ways to encourage certain kinds of behavior (such as all chairs in a classroom facing toward the center of the room to encourage discussion and collaboration). The spatial mode includes:

- arrangement
- organization
- proximity between people or objects

Attention to the spatial mode has become increasingly important as we create content for and interact within online environments. The author of a text must pay attention to how his or her content is organized so that readers can find their way through the text without difficulty.

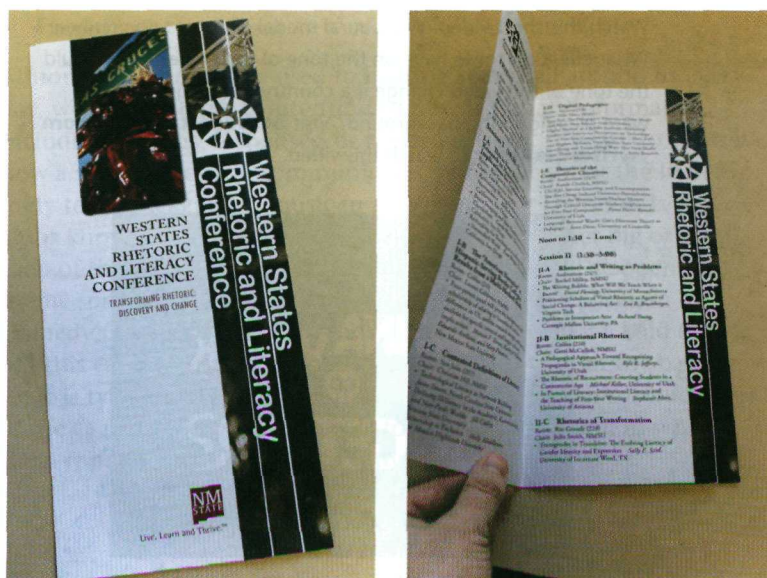


Figure 1.11 Tabbed Brochure Utilizing the Spatial Mode



Figure 1.12 Cheryl Ball's Twitter Feed

The designers of Twitter chose how to lay out the basic profile page (with the tweets in the right column and info about the user on the left), and users can choose design templates and profile images—all of which means that *layout* draws on spatial, visual, and linguistic modes of communication, showing that it's nearly impossible for a text *not* to use multiple modes at once.

Visit the home page for your favorite retail, entertainment, or news Web site. Notice how the spatial mode is used: Where is your eye drawn? How are the elements on the page laid out? What effect does this spatial arrangement have on how you read, use, and understand the information on the page? How would your interaction with the page be different if, say, the information found at the top of the page were suddenly swapped with the information at the bottom?

Process!

Gestural Mode

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

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

The gestural has always been important in face-to-face conversations and in the theater, but understanding the gestural mode is just as

Figure 1.13 Katie Couric's Opening to Her First Newscast

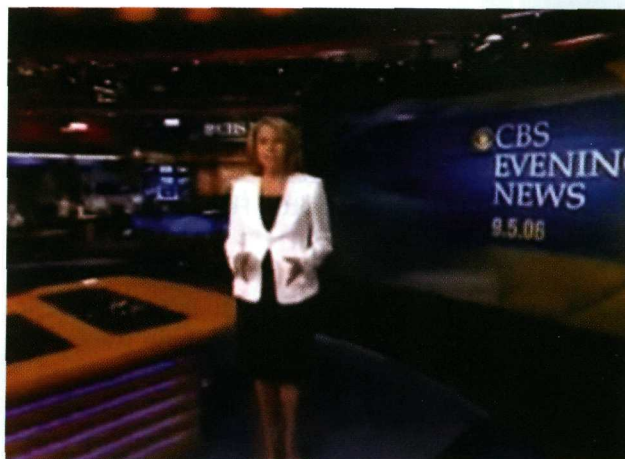
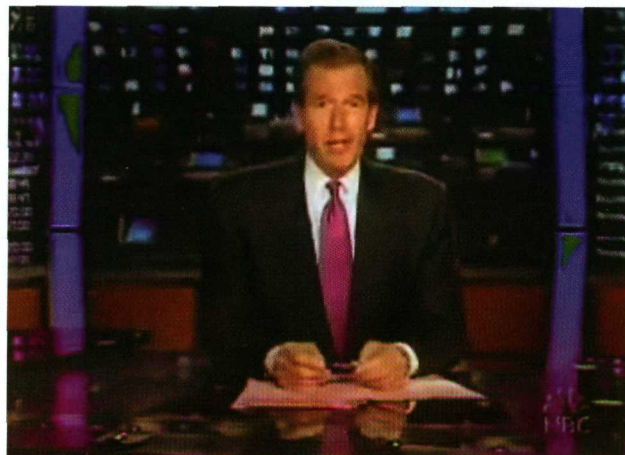


Figure 1.14 Brian Williams's Opening to His Newscast



important when communication takes place through virtual interactions on-screen. Whether we are participating in a videoconference with colleagues, a gaming raid with friends, or an online chat with family, the gestural mode provides an important way of connecting (or showing an inability to connect) to other people.

Consider, for example, how Katie Couric opened her first CBS newscast standing alongside her desk, and contrast it with Brian Williams's stiff and formal posture behind his desk during his newscast (Figs. 1.13 and 1.14). Couric's body position was an attempt to be more approachable than other anchors, but her more personable gestures translated to more gender-stereotyped ideas of femininity, which worked against Couric, the first female solo anchor on a prime-time broadcast network newscast.

Visit bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner to watch this video of President Obama delivering his second inaugural address. Notice how the president uses the gestural mode to support his points. Pay particular attention to his hand gestures and facial expressions. Do you find his use of the gestural mode effective? Why or why not?

Compare the video of President Obama with a video of Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state under George W. Bush, giving a speech at the Republican National Convention in 2012. How do Obama's and Rice's gestures differ?



Figure 1.15
President
Obama
Speaking



Figure 1.16
Condoleezza
Rice Speaking

Process!



Composing for Access

One cool thing about multimodality is that it can attend to multiple senses, which is sometimes necessary if a reader has a preference or need for one mode of communication over another. When creating multimodal texts, authors should *always* remember that not every reader will be exactly like them, either in culture, society, class, race, gender, or ability. A text should be composed so that readers with limited vision, hearing, or touch—among other possible differences within an audience—can still interact with the text. For instance, imagine that you're filming someone who speaks American Sign Language—would you film the person from the shoulders up, cutting their hands from the shot? No! As you analyze and compose multimodal texts, be careful to compose for as many different users with as many different backgrounds and abilities as possible.

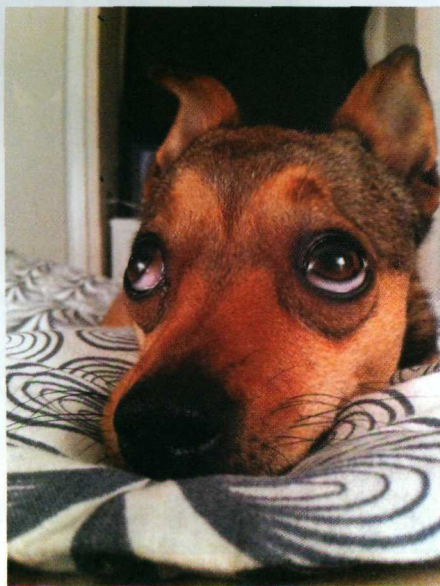
Understanding Media and Affordances

Let's say you want to share how much you adore your dog because your dog is so cute! You have hundreds of photos. These pictures are your *media* (singular *medium*) that you could share. The *medium* is the way in which your text reaches your audience. Other media you might use are video, speech, or paper (not a research paper per se, but the physical artifact on which a research paper would be printed).

Different media use different combinations of modes and are good at doing different things. We've all heard the expression "a picture is worth a thousand words." Sometimes it is much easier and more effective to use an image to show someone how to do something or how you are feeling. Say, for example, that the reason you wanted a picture of your dog is to show your friend

in another state what the dog looks like (see Fig. 1.17). A picture will quickly convey more information in this situation than will a written description.

Figure 1.17 Poor, Sad, Adorable Enid



At other times, words may work better than images when we are trying to explain an idea because words can be more descriptive and to the point. It may take too many pictures to convey the same idea quickly (see Fig. 1.18).

Enid wakes me up at 4am on the day I'm leaving.
Lies on my chest and stares at me. 22 hours later I
get to my hotel. — in Saint Louis, MO.

Figure 1.18 Facebook Status Update Contextualizing Enid's Pitiful Look

And in other situations in which we are trying to communicate how something should be done, it can be more useful to create an animation or video that demonstrates the steps in a process than to write out instructions.

These different strengths and weaknesses of media (video, writing, pictures, etc.) and modes are called *affordances*. The visual mode *affords* us the opportunity to communicate emotion in an immediate way, while the linguistic mode *affords* us the time we need to communicate a set of detailed steps. Writer/designers think through the affordances of the modes and media available before choosing the right text for the right situation. Keep in mind that modal affordances largely depend on how the mode is used and in what context. In other words, the strengths and weaknesses of each mode are dependent on, and influenced by, the ways in which the modes are combined, in what media, and to what ends.

CASE STUDY

Modes, Media, and Affordances

Although we've given you examples in this chapter of how each mode works on its own to communicate, we want to finish this chapter with an extended example of how all of the modes work together in a single multimodal text. Throughout this example, we're going to highlight some of the key concepts we want you to pay attention to.

The documents in **Figures 1.19 and 1.20** were created by the US government to communicate information about nationwide economic recovery efforts. In the 1930s, the United States was suffering through a severe economic meltdown, known now as the Great Depression. To help alleviate the situation, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) created the Works Progress Administration,

which put millions of Americans to work repairing and updating the United States' infrastructure, including building highways and fixing streets. The map in **Figure 1.19** shows a state-by-state and county-by-county textual and visual overview of street projects funded by the government.

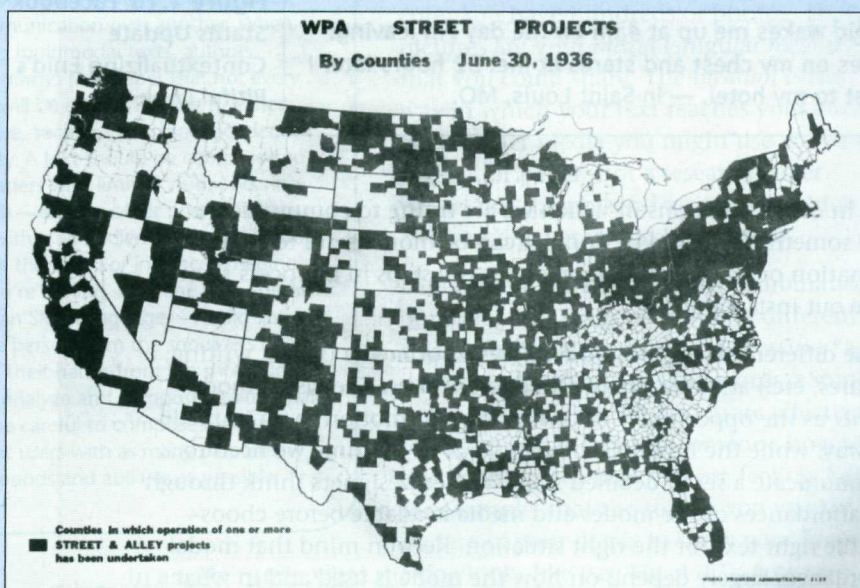


Figure 1.19 Map of WPA Street Projects, 1936

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

The words on this map (the **linguistic mode**) describe what we are looking at. The shaded areas on the map visually represent locations where at least one project had taken place. Here, the color-coding (the **visual mode**) shows us what areas received the most assistance. The information is organized in map form (the **spatial mode**), which positions the color-coded points according to US counties. The visual and spatial modes work together to help us make comparisons between locations. For example, the densely shaded area in the Northeast, where the US population was most concentrated at the time, can be compared against the relatively barren spots in the West, where fewer people lived. A spatial representation of the states from 1936, when there were only forty-eight states, will be different from an 1803 map that focuses on the Louisiana Purchase, or from a 2011 map showing all fifty states. So in this map, the linguistic, visual, and spatial modes work together to show readers where street projects occurred in 1936.

Now consider how this map could have been read differently if the proportion of words and numbers (linguistic mode) to visual and spatial information had been changed to favor the linguistic elements. For instance, what if, instead of the street projects map, readers only got large tables of data for each state, county, or project? (In fact, other parts of the WPA report from which the map is taken do include many data tables, such as the one seen in **Figure 1.20**.) The linguistic mode often affords readers specificity, exactness, and logical connections, but this can slow readers down as they work to make sense of the information. The visual mode, on the other hand, often can't be as detailed. We don't know from the map, for example, *how many* projects were completed in each area. But a visual presentation of complex information can allow readers to make quick comparisons. This ability for quick comparison is an affordance of the visual mode, particularly within the particular medium of the printed map.

We should also consider the affordances of the **media** available at the time of distribution. In 1936, radio and print (typically government reports or newspapers) would have been the primary media used to communicate to the public.

VALUE OF MATERIALS, SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT PROCURED FOR WPA PROJECTS, BY TYPES OF PROJECTS Through May 30, 1936		
Type of Project	Total Value	
	Amount	Percent
TOTAL	\$ 142,935,931	100.0
Highways, roads, and streets	45,952,629	32.1
Public buildings	27,297,802	19.1
Housing	67,172	0.1
Parks and playgrounds	20,601,596	14.4
Flood control and other conservation	6,817,343	4.8
Water supply and sewer systems	24,065,084	16.8
Electric utilities	586,279	0.4
Transportation	4,156,418	2.9
Educational, professional and clerical	2,944,215	2.1
Goods	3,822,563	2.7
Sanitation and health	3,287,372	2.3
Miscellaneous	3,337,458	2.3

Figure 1.20 Table of WPA Projects Data, 1936

A data table from a 1936 report showing the value of materials used in WPA projects.

Printing in color would have been prohibitively expensive, so black-and-white visuals and written text had to be used. In **Figure 1.21** we can see a more modern version of a similar report, a digitally based map from the Recovery.gov Web site illustrating economic recovery in the United States in 2009–2010. As FDR did in establishing the Works Progress Administration, President Obama created the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to stimulate job creation and repairs to the US infrastructure during difficult economic times.

Figure 1.21 is a contemporary version of the 1936 WPA report; it appears on a Web site and is interactive (as the highlighting and pop-up about New Mexico show). Its medium is a Web-based map as opposed to a print-based map. It uses linguistic, visual, and spatial modes of communication, just like the 1936 map does, but it also includes interactivity (a gestural mode). Below the map, there is an interactive search tool to find specific funding information by zip code. Because of the affordances of the Web (such as cheaper use of multiple colors and the use of electronic databases and interactivity), this map communicates

FUNDING FOR FEDERAL CONTRACTS, GRANTS AND LOANS

February 17, 2009 - September 30, 2012

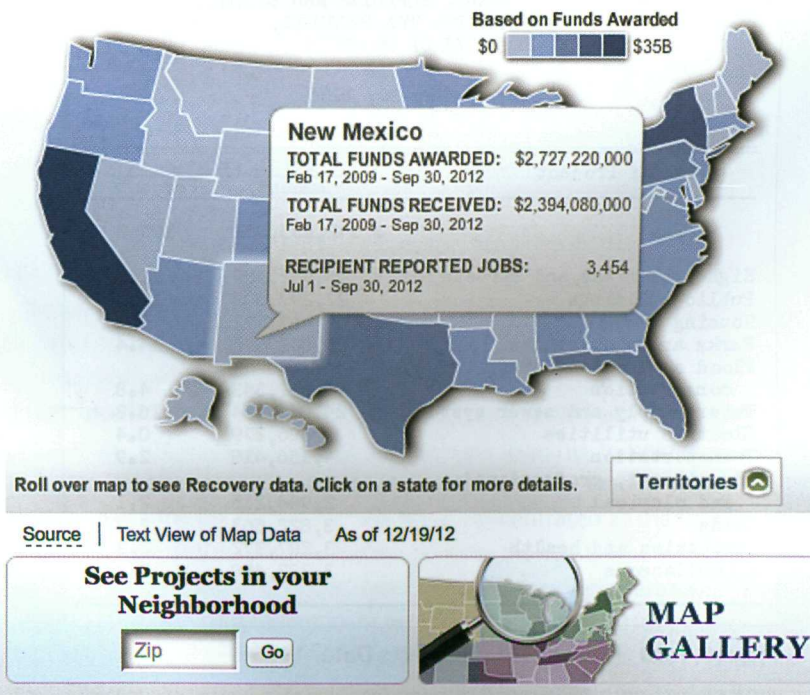


Figure 1.21 An Interactive Map from the Recovery.gov Web Site

a lot more information than a printed map in 1936 would have been able to communicate. These differences don't mean that the Web is a better medium than print—just that, due to the technological changes in the last century, the Web allows for more complex and detailed information to be conveyed using a similarly sized map.

Writing/Designing Multimodally

The image in **Figure 1.21** highlights at least four different modes of communication being used in one text (linguistic, spatial, gestural, visual). Other texts, such as video interviews on the Recovery.gov Web site, combine all *five* modes, including the aural. One way to think about the different modes of communication is as a set of tools. You may not use all of them for a single project, because each mode has its own strengths and weaknesses in specific situations—just as a wrench is more useful in fixing a faucet than a hammer is. Like the tools in a toolbox, though, modes can sometimes be used in ways that weren't intended but that get the job done just as well (like a screwdriver being used to pry open a can of paint).

Together, the many modes that make up texts are useful in different situations. Multimodality gives writers additional tools for designing effective texts. This is particularly true when writers are trying to create a single text that will appeal to the interests of a large and diverse group of readers. By understanding who their readers are, what they need to know, and how they will use the information, authors can create texts that satisfy a specific rhetorical situation, a concept we will cover in Chapter 2.

write/design assignment

Describing Multimodality in Everyday Texts

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