2 Analyzing Multimodal Projects

Have you ever been walking through town, and one flyer among the hundreds of flyers you see every day stands out so much that you can't help but stop and read it? Have you ever been rushing to leave the house when your favorite song starts playing on the radio, and you have to listen to it before you can leave? Have you ever found a Web site link or online video so exciting or funny that you have to immediately share it with your Facebook friends? These multimodal texts are captivating—they capture your attention and encourage you to interact with them and share them. Chances are the multimodal texts that caught and held your attention are the ones that used the most effective design choices. These are the kinds of texts we want you to build. In this chapter you will learn how to analyze multimodal texts to discover how effective design choices are made for different texts in different situations.

Writer/designers have a wide variety of options for creating an effective text. What makes a text effective depends on a number of factors: What is the author's reason for creating the text? What audience is the author trying to reach? In what place, time, or situation is the text being created? Analyzing these factors will help you understand the projects of other writer/designers and will help you create your own multimodal texts (a task we'll take on in Chapter 3).

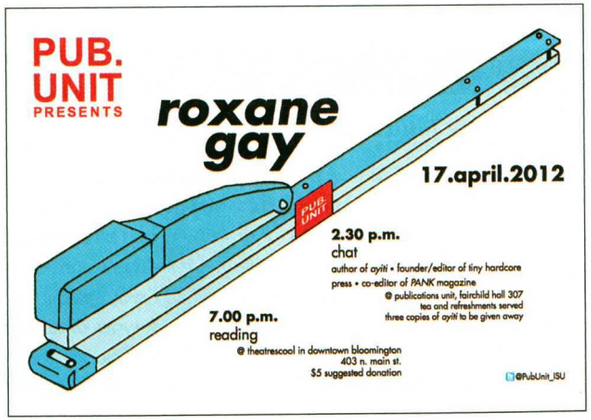

Figure 2.1 An Effective Multimodal Flyer

This flyer on a school bulletin board caught Cheryl's attention. It was printed in color and in landscape orientation on 11″ x 17″ paper.

Rhetoric and Multimodality

When we talk about "effective" or "successful" texts, we're talking about rhetoric. Texts need to be created for a purpose, to persuade an audience toward change in some way; **rhetoric** is the study of making texts that effectively persuade an audience toward change. Echoing that old philosophical question—if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?—if a text doesn't induce change, then it isn't rhetorically successful. *Successful* multimodal persuasion is what this book is about.

You're probably familiar with some forms of persuading others to take action in favor of an author's viewpoint, such as when an advertisement tries to persuade us to choose a particular political candidate, a new summer outfit, a different brand of toothpaste, a recycling option, or a party to attend. Sometimes this change is more subtle and the action is less explicit, such as when we read a novel to better understand the human condition (or simply to relax), or—as in the Recovery.gov example in the previous chapter—when we explore a government Web site to learn more about how our taxes are spent and who they benefit.

As readers, we can choose whether to act based on how effectively a text persuades us. Let's think about a musical example. While a musician probably has many hopes for a song—that it speaks to people and is artistically meaningful, for example—one hope is that listeners will enjoy the song enough to purchase it. Whether listeners buy it depends on a lot of things: whether they like the song's lyrics, whether the song speaks to them in some way, whether they have the money, what format the song is available in, what technology they have for listening to the song, etc. The song's author had to think through all of these possibilities when creating and distributing the song. In the end, the author has created a text that asks readers to make a choice. A particular listener's choice may be to do nothing (not to listen to or buy the song), but that's still a choice.

Our reactions typically depend on how well an author is able to address the **rhetorical situation**. The rhetorical situation is the set of circumstances in which an author creates a text. Authors have to pay attention to four factors: their intended **audience**, their **purpose** for communicating, the **context** in which their text will be read, and the **genre** they choose for their text if they want to be effective communicators.

Rhetorical Analysis

Understanding the situation in which an author composed a text can help us better understand a text's meaning and make judgments about its effectiveness. Who was the author? Why did he or she compose this text? When and where was it composed? Whom did the author want to reach? Why is the text in this particular form? Thinking through the rhetorical situation like this is called rhetorical analysis. A **rhetorical analysis** is a method of describing the context in which an author wants to communicate his or her purpose or call for action to the intended audience in a genre. Below, we offer the five areas to address—audience, purpose, context, author, and genre—and offer some questions to consider when performing a rhetorical analysis.

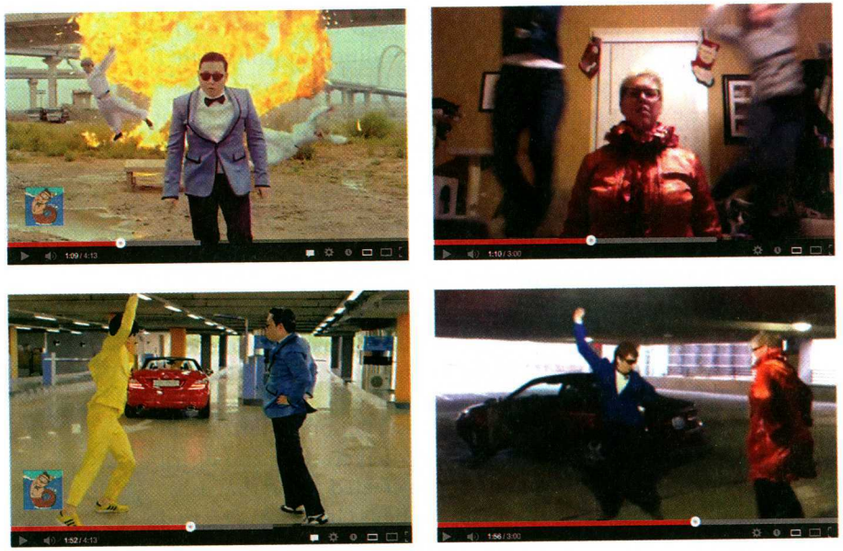

Figure 2.2 A Parody Video for Rhetorical Analysis

Cheryl decided to parody (right) Psy's "Gangnam Style" video (**genre**, left) for her friend's (**audience**) birthday (**context**) because her friend's last name sounds similar to *Gangnam* (**purpose**).

Audience

The audience is the intended readership for a text. There may be more than one intended audience, and there may also be more than one actual audience. Consider a pop-country song playing over the sound system at a mall. The songwriter's intended audience is likely

pop-country fans, and her secondary audience may be country or pop-music fans. Yet, in this context, the actual audience is anyone who happens to hear it.

In a rhetorical analysis, your job is to pay attention to the intended primary and secondary audiences. While it is not necessarily your job to consider how the text will function if read by those outside the intended audience, doing so can sometimes be illuminating.

When analyzing audience, consider these questions:

- Who is the intended audience?
- Who might be the secondary audience(s)?
- What values or opinions do the primary and secondary audiences hold? Does the author appeal to these values or opinions in any way?

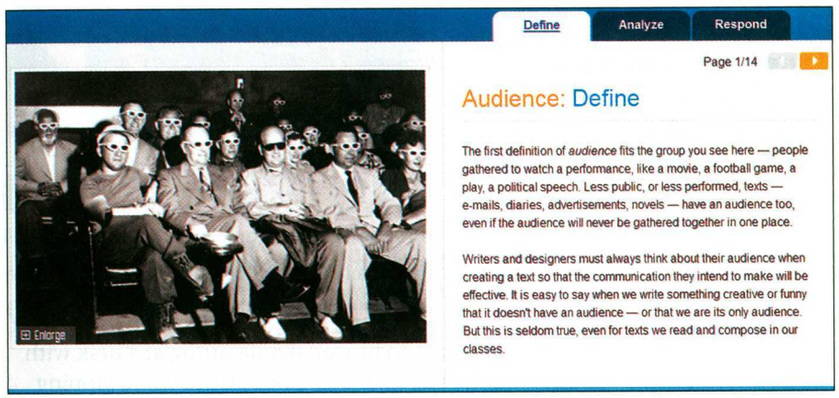

Figure 2.3 *ix: visualizing composition: Audience*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *audience*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Purpose

Describing a text's purpose may sound somewhat simplistic, yet it is important to consider a range of possible intentions—while there may be a large-scale purpose, there often are also secondary purposes. For example, a billboard for a local steakhouse has the primary purpose of attracting new clientele, but it may have the secondary purpose of solidifying existing customers' opinion of the restaurant as a fun-loving family establishment.

When analyzing purpose, consider these questions:

- What do you consider to be the overall intention for the text? What leads you to this conclusion?
- Might there be one or more secondary intentions? Why do you think so?

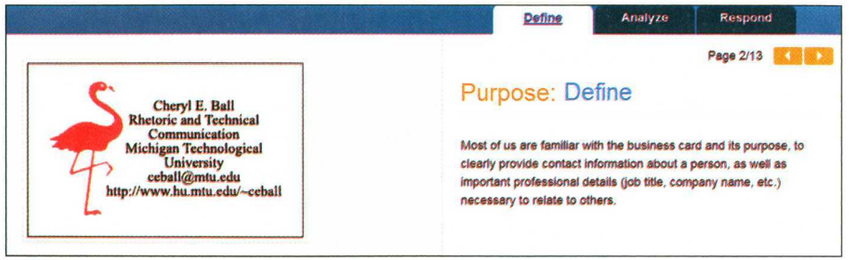

Figure 2.4 *ix: visualizing composition: Purpose*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *purpose*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Context

Context can be quite broad, though it generally refers to additional information about a text, such as *where* the text is located (in an academic journal at a library, for example, or in the advertising section of a free weekly), *how* it is meant to be read (while sitting at a desk with one's full attention on the pages, or at a quick glance while flipping through a newspaper), or *what* surrounds it (similar academic journal articles, other advertisements, an article about dining in Seattle).

When analyzing context, consider these questions:

- What is the medium (print, CD, app, the Web, video, etc.)? Why do you think the author chose this particular medium over another one?
- Where did you find the text? What was the publication venue (book, newspaper, album, television, etc.)?
- What were the historical conventions for this type of text? What materials, media, or publishing venues were available at the time?

- What are the social and cultural connotations within the text? What colors, pictures, or phrases are used? What technologies does the text use?
- How will readers interact with this text? Will they read it on their phone or tablet while walking down the street? on a desktop computer in a public library? on a laptop in their backyard?

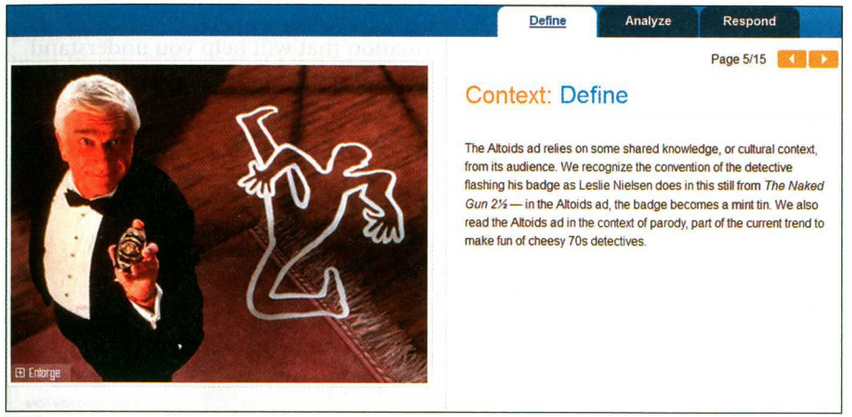

Figure 2.5 *ix: visualizing composition: Context*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *context*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Author

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

When analyzing authorship, consider these questions:

- How does the author (implied or actual) establish personal credibility? Do you trust this source? Does it matter?
- How does the author (implied or actual) come across?
- Does the author (implied or actual) have a certain reputation? Does the text work to support this reputation, or does it work to alter this reputation?
- If you know who the actual author is, can you find any historical or biographical information that will help you understand his or her credibility, character, and reputation?

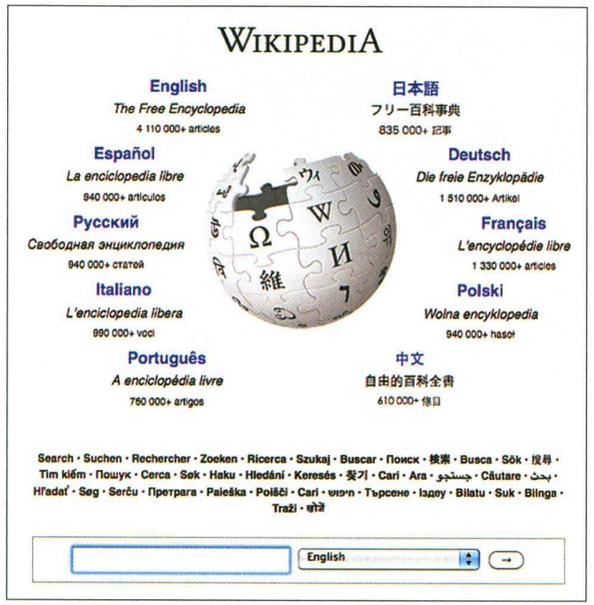

Figure 2.6 *Wikipedia* **Home Page**

Wikipedia is renowned for its multiply authored and edited encyclopedic entries.

Genre

You've probably heard the term *genre* used to talk about static categories of texts in broad terms (sometimes related to the medium of a text), such as newspapers, albums, or movies, or in more specific terms—horror movies, romantic comedies, Westerns, and so on. Generally speaking, audiences expect something from newspapers that they do not expect from movies, and they expect something from horror movies that they do not expect from romantic comedies. This traditional understanding of genre helps us recognize how to group similar texts and understand their communicative purpose.

However, genres aren't just static categories; they can morph according to the local culture, the historical time period, the author of the text, the audience for the text, and many other influences. Think about the two maps we looked at in Chapter 1 and how different they are. Yet we're still able to recognize them both as maps, even though the genre conventions for an interactive online map and a print map may differ slightly. Genres are dynamic, but most genres have formal features that tend to remain the same in each use. These features are the **genre conventions**, or audience expectations, in the text. (We'll talk more about genre and genre conventions in Chapter 3.)

When analyzing genre, consider these questions:

- How might you define the genre of the text? Consider both a broad definition and a more specific definition.
- In what ways is the text similar to other texts within this genre?
- What key features make it part of the genre you've identified?

Is There a Right Answer?

You may never know everything there is to know about the author's intended purpose or audience. Additionally, there isn't always (or ever) a "right" answer when analyzing a text. What we can do is learn how to analyze texts so that we can better guess, hypothesize, or even create a theory about how a text works and why.

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

Now that we've described the types of questions to consider when performing a rhetorical analysis, we're going to put these terms to action by analyzing the home page of the Washington State University Web site. This analysis can help illuminate how particular design choices are made in particular situations. Our goal is to figure out what types of **design choices** were used by the **author** to effectively convey the text's **purpose** to the **audience**. To achieve this goal, we also need to understand a bit about the **genre** and **context** for this particular text.

CASE STUDY

Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation

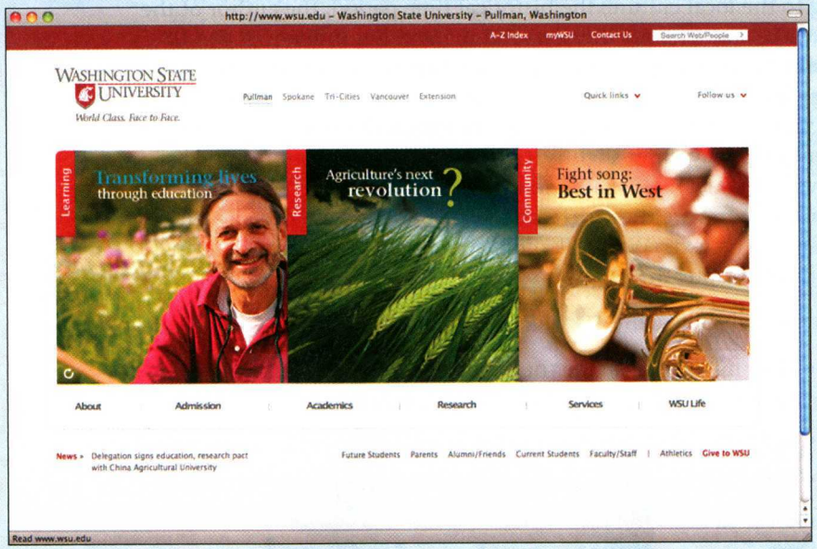

Figure 2.7 The Front Page of the Washington State University Web Site (October 2010)

Figure 2.7 shows the home page of the Washington State University (WSU) Web site. We're going to start our rhetorical analysis by thinking about this text's **purpose**, which in this case is closely tied to its **genre**. This text, like most university home pages, has two main purposes: (1) to serve as the portal to a large amount of additional information about the university and (2) to brand the university in a positive light. These dual purposes are what we would expect from a text within the genre of a university Web site home page. University Web sites tend to include attractive images and links to information about the university's academic and athletic programs, its admissions and financial aid policies, its students and faculty, and the town in which the school is located.

When it comes to the **author**, it is more useful to speak of the implied author (WSU) rather than the actual author (probably a person or group of people working in Web or information technology services on campus). Because the purpose of the page is to present a single informational view of WSU, no one person's name (or group of names) is listed on this page. The **audience** for the home

page is the intended readership: people interested in WSU, including current or potential students and their parents, alumni, faculty and staff, or donors. A good designer would try to think of all the different reasons to visit the WSU home page and then design the page for these various users.

The Web site Design Shack did a study of fifty US university home pages from 2010 and concluded that the majority of them use the same ineffective design because they try to cram too much information into too little space. (In comparison, WSU's Web site topped the "Honor Roll" of best designs.)

We should also take into account the **context** in which this Web site was designed. Analyzing a genre within its *historical* and *technological context* is important—as our genre expectations change, so does the effectiveness of a particular design. This version of the WSU Web site was created in 2010 and is intended for viewing on a desktop or laptop computer. This genre convention—designing for larger screens—will likely change as the number of everyday users accessing the Web via handheld devices increases. For instance, consider how the very first Washington State University Web site looked in 1997 (see **Fig. 2.8**). Handheld devices barely existed at the time, and Web design principles were still in their infancy. The multiple, competing points of emphasis on the page (exacerbated by the overuse of crimson, a color that culturally draws our attention) and other design conventions of the period are no longer commonplace. Compare the 1997 site with the redesigned site from 2000 (see **Fig. 2.9**).

Figure 2.8 1997 Version of the WSU Web Site

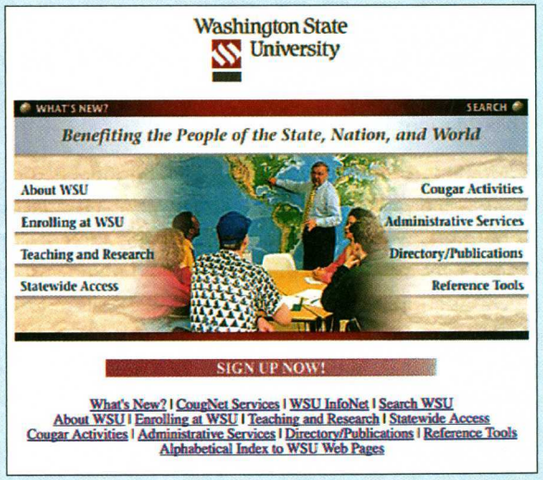

Figure 2.9 2000 Version of the WSU Web Site

Contextually speaking, how do the 1997, 2000, and 2010 sites differ? Each of those sites looked good in its time, and many university Web sites have used similar designs in their histories.

In addition, the *cultural context* of a multimodal text can have a big impact on how we analyze that text. For example, the left sidebar in **Figure 2.9** includes a photo of a woman smiling directly at the audience. In countries that value groups over individuals, this photo would go against social customs and might be considered rude or even threatening. This is a good reminder that what we take for granted as a customary genre or genre convention in the United States (or in certain parts of it) may not hold across all cultures, social settings, or time periods. We can only analyze the WSU Web site's effectiveness in relation to its rhetorical situation, which has a unique combination of these contexts.

Process!

A university home page serves many purposes, and often appeals to some audiences more than others. Visit a university Web site's home page, and notice what information is emphasized on the front page. Why do you think this is the case? What does this say about who the primary intended audience is? What does the university assume this audience is looking for?

Do you see more information that sells the university (press releases, promotions for cultural events, a letter from the president) than you see standard university information (an academic calendar, application forms, a campus map, faculty emails)? How do you think this matters when it comes to the purpose and audience for this university's home page?

Analyzing Design Choices

Now that we know the rhetorical situation of the WSU Web site's home page—that is, its author, audience, purpose, genre, and context—we're going to examine how the author's **design choices** support the rhetorical situation. As we look more closely at the types of choices a designer makes, we focus on five key design concepts: **emphasis**, **contrast**, **organization**, **alignment**, and **proximity**. These terms aren't the only ones you could use to talk about choices—you may come up with some terms on your own or in collaboration with your colleagues—but to give you a start, we describe how these five design concepts are enacted through a variety of design choices. We call your attention to how these choices connect with the rhetorical situation described above, and we ask you to think about how such choices are or are not effective in this particular rhetorical situation.

Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to see an interactive version of our design choices analysis.

Emphasis

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

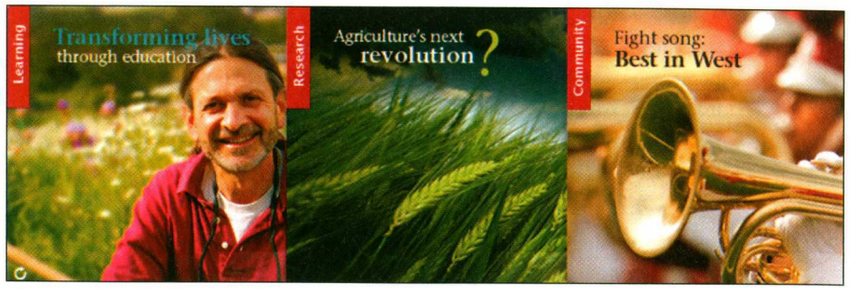

Figure 2.10 Primary Visual Emphasis on the WSU Web Site

The three photos shown in **Figure 2.10** are given primary visual emphasis on the WSU home page from 2010. Simply put, they stand out. By emphasizing something bright, colorful, and positive (a smiling man, a picturesque wheat field, and a marching trombone from the WSU marching band), the author conveys the feeling of a happy and productive environment where people are filled with school spirit. Given that one of the purposes of the home page is to positively brand the university, this use of emphasis is an effective design choice.

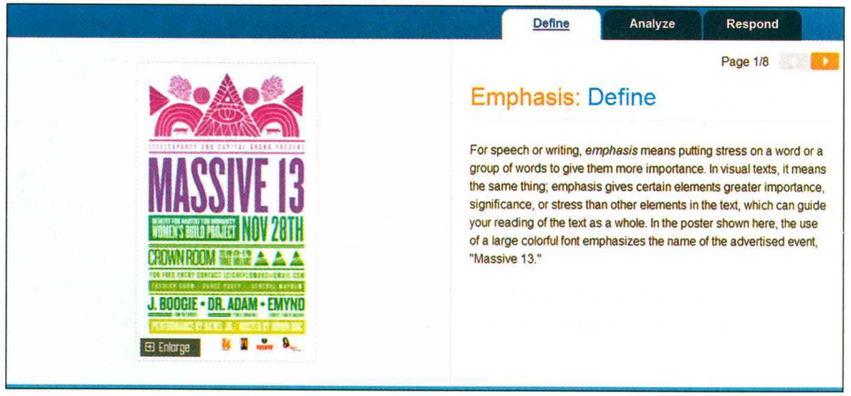

Figure 2.11 *ix: visualizing composition: Emphasis*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *emphasis*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Contrast

Contrast is the difference between elements, where the combination of those elements makes one element stand out from another. Contrast can be determined by comparing elements in a text. Color, size, placement, shape, and content can all be used to create contrast in a text. Contrast plays a large role in emphasis, in that the most contrasted element often appears to be the most emphasized.

Notice how the WSU home page takes advantage of white space—a design technique that subtly employs contrast by leaving more of the background of the page (which usually lacks any elements other than a color or graphic) empty, making everything else on the page "pop." Thus, the page is not too busy, and the audience can easily find what they're looking for, be it donors looking for ways to give to WSU, a student searching for a professor's email address, or the parents of a potential student looking to learn more about the school's reputation.

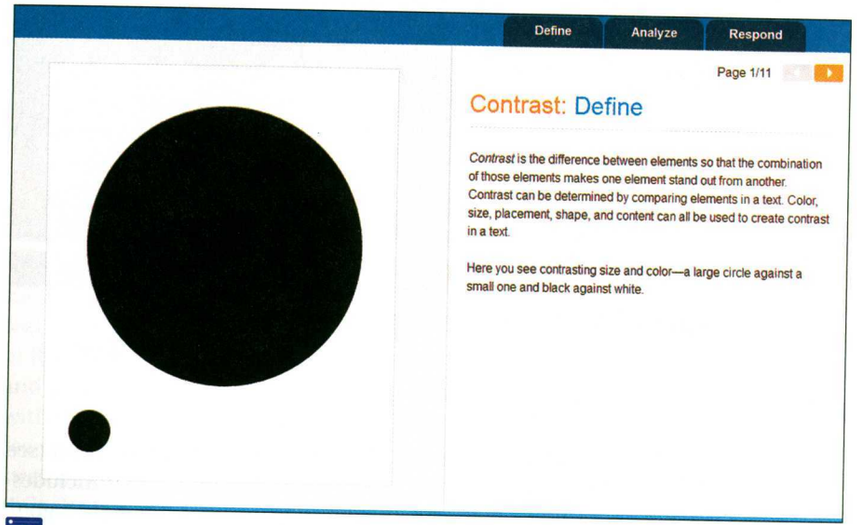

Figure 2.12 *ix: visualizing composition: Contrast*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *contrast*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Organization

Organization is the way in which elements are arranged to form a coherent unit or functioning whole. You can talk about an organization of people, which puts people into a hierarchy depending on their job title and department, or about organizing your clothes, which might involve sorting by color and type of garment. You can also talk about organizing an essay, which involves arranging your ideas so as to make the strongest argument possible. Or you can talk about organizing the multimodal elements of a Web site to support the purpose of the text.

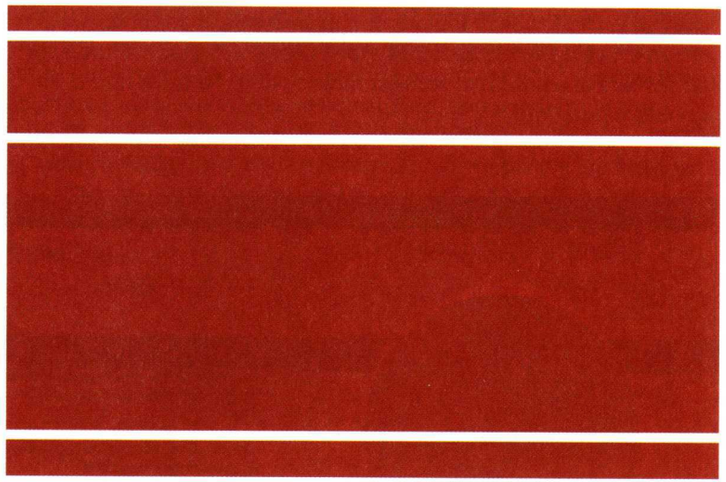

Figure 2.13 Organization of the WSU Web Site

This graphic represents the four blocks of information on the WSU Web site.

The WSU home page is organized into four rows of information (see **Fig. 2.13**). The first row is a crimson-colored rectangle that includes an index and a search bar. The second row includes the WSU logo, links to the Web sites for the various WSU campuses, and Quick Links. The third row, the one most emphasized, includes the three photos and the main topic links (About, Admission, Academics, Research, Services, and WSU Life). The final row includes a News link as well as links specific to particular audiences (future students, parents, alumni and friends, current students, faculty and staff). If we consider the purpose of this Web site as well as its audience, this organization appears to be effective in many ways.

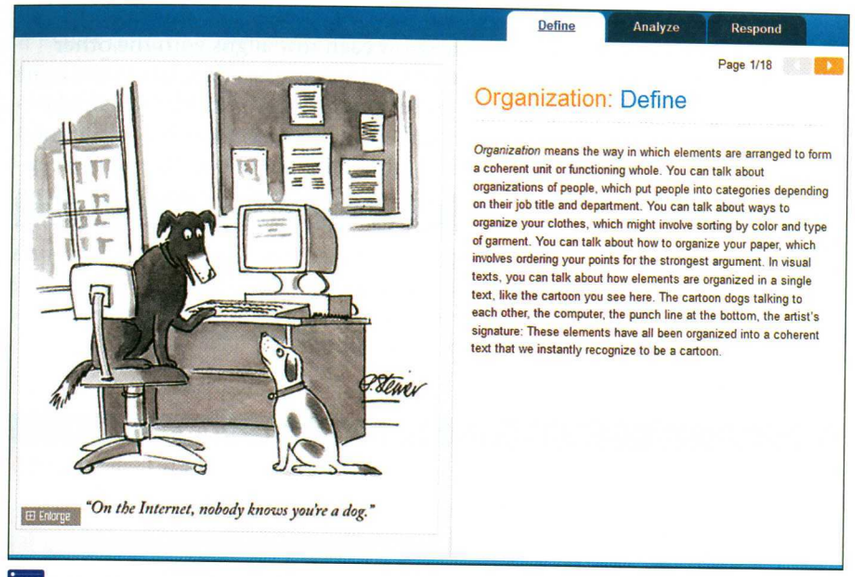

Figure 2.14 *ix: visualizing composition: Organization*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *organization*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Alignment

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

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

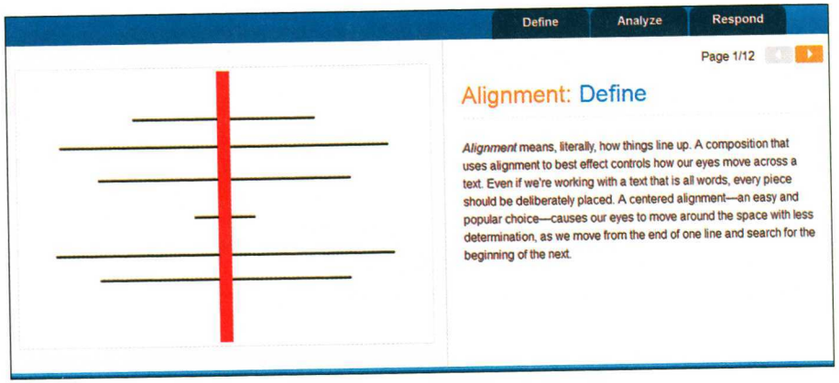

Figure 2.15 *ix: visualizing composition: Alignment*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *alignment*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Proximity

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

As described in the organization analysis, there are four major groups of written links in the WSU home page. An audience member might

be looking for information specific to a campus or to an audience, so it makes sense that the author chose to place the items in each group close together; the words' close proximity to one another suggests a close relationship, whereas the groups themselves are placed farther apart. This design choice helps to make the page more usable.

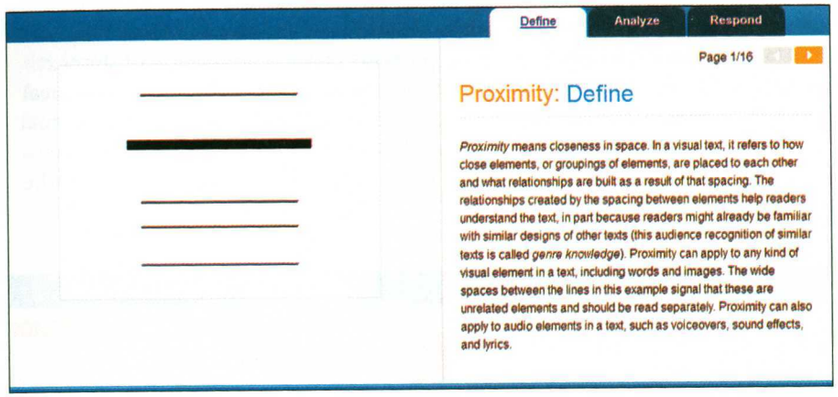

Figure 2.16 *ix: visualizing composition: Proximity*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *proximity*. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** to complete this tutorial.

Process!

Visit your favorite Web site. Take note of the design choices that stand out to you, paying attention to the following:

- What elements does the design of the Web site emphasize? The logo? A certain picture? The navigation bar?
- Notice the organization of elements on the page. What comes first? What comes last? Why do you think the designer chose this order?
- How is contrast used on the page? Does the use of contrast help to emphasize certain elements? Does the use of contrast create a certain feeling? (Consider how certain colors can be used to encourage certain emotional responses.)
- What elements are aligned on the page? Does this alignment help you navigate the page? Does it cause your eye to travel in a certain direction on the page? Why might the designer have made this choice?
- How are elements positioned in relation to one another? Why do you think the designers of this page put certain elements in close proximity to one another while placing others farther apart?

Writing and Designing Rhetorically

We began this chapter by discussing the rhetorical situation and then moved on to the design choices. However, we can also work the other way around—starting with an analysis of the design choices so as to understand the rhetorical situation. Don't be surprised if analyzing a text's design (as we asked you to do in the Process! activity on page 37) causes you to go back and say more about the audience, purpose, context, and genre of the text. Examining design choices helps us learn more about the rhetorical situation. Doing a rhetorical analysis isn't always a linear or formal process, as the WSU case study shows—we could have written a lot more about the design choices or the rhetorical situation of the WSU home page.

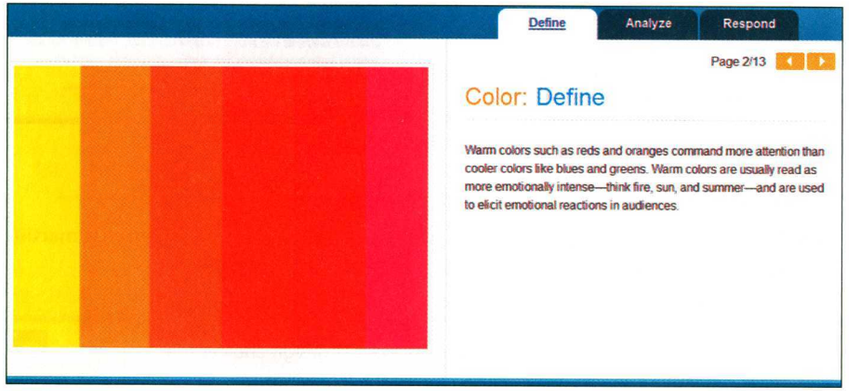

Figure 2.17 *ix: visualizing composition: More Design Terms*

There are also more design terms you can use to discuss a text's design. Visit **bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner** for more interactive tutorials on design choices.

Keep in mind that using rhetorical analysis to understand a text may result in a favorable opinion of the text but may also illuminate various problems—the rhetorical analysis may help explain why the text has that "wow" factor, or why it doesn't. For instance, consider if, instead of providing a few welcoming photos and easy-to-find links, the WSU home page were designed like an essay in a word-processing document. This primarily linguistic mode of design would be appropriate for an essay but would not be appropriate for the audience, purpose, context, or genre expectations of a Web site in 2014; thus, a Web page with this design would most likely be seen as a failure.

write/design assignment

Rhetorical Analysis of Multimodal Texts

Find three examples of multimodal texts that come from similar genres (e.g., university Web sites, talking cat videos, newspaper ads). If you already know what genre you're expected to produce for a class, project, or client, choose three texts from that genre. Perform a rhetorical analysis of the texts, whereby you describe each text's author, purpose, audience, genre, and context, and explain how different design choices are used to meet the demands of the rhetorical situation. When describing design choices, begin with the terms from this chapter: emphasis, contrast, organization, alignment, and proximity. However, you may realize other terms are necessary to fully describe the texts.