

Chapter 8. Designing Across Modalities

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This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify ways that designing is a rhetorical act
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- Address needs to design flexibly and ethically

You may not think of yourself as a designer, if most of what you write is quick texts to friends and double-spaced essays for school. After all, you're just putting words on a screen.

But even a decision *not to design* your document carefully is a design decision, and it's rhetorical: you submit essays to your epidemiology instructor that have a title, 500 words, one-inch margins, and no pictures because your goal is to provide information about the latest coronavirus and your audience values a document that focuses on your words. If you were sending a text on a similar subject to a friend, you'd be more likely to include a picture, a link to a news story about a recent virus outbreak, and/or some emojis to convey how bad you think the situation is.

Whenever you think—or avoid thinking—about the arrangement and presentation of your document, you are thinking about its design:

- How to arrange your words on the page or screen
- How to select and arrange any pictures, graphs, or diagrams to include along with your words
- How to use fonts, colors, shapes, and patterns to emphasize your message
- How to connect your writing instantly to other documents via hyperlinks
- Whether you want to use written words at all, when you could use spoken words combined with a slideshow, video enhanced by music or voice-over commentary, or a combination of live-action and animated visuals

8.1 All Writers Are Designers

Fifty years ago, most ordinary students and professionals didn't think much about design; after all, the production and sharing of documents happened mostly through specialized publishers, and those publishers hired specialists who could consider layout, illustrations, and conversion to other media. Today, almost everyone who is a writer is also a designer: we have options for arrangement and visual enhancement literally at our fingertips, and we share writing with friends and strangers all on our own, without any specialists.

Document design is rhetorical

You should pay attention to designing your messages, assignments, and professional documents because of your own goals, and because of your readers' expectations. The saying, "A picture is worth 1000 words" hints at the power that writers can have when we look beyond simple text to include visual (or musical, or gestural) elements. Not only do elements such as pictures, colors, and sounds affect readers' emotional responses to your ideas, but they can enhance the intellectual effect of your document as well: after all, words are powerful but slippery, and photographs, charts, recordings, and even raised eyebrows can provide more exact or more powerful information.

Since design is rhetorical, you may want to consider how several threshold concepts can guide your design decisions:



Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.



There is no single definition of a “good writer”

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce “good writing” depending on the writer’s goals and the audience’s needs.



Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.



There are many ways to solve a writing problem

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

Design choices are often easier to spot than text-based choices, and the options evolve rapidly, so they provide some accessible opportunities to test the limits of a threshold concept. What counts as a “good” text, meme, or video for the media you follow today? How is that different from even a few years ago? Each time a new communication choice arises—for instance, the way that TikTok launched in 2017—we get to see how community preferences influence the definitions of what is “good,” and how innovative composers push and alter those definitions.

You need to pay attention to design principles because your readers expect it. In the past 20 years, social communication has moved from basic blogs (text plus visuals) to infographics, interactive animations, and videos. Professional communication, too, has a higher bar: if everyone in your office *can* make a pie chart easily on their phone or tablet, then people begin to expect that everyone in your office *should* include relevant charts and diagrams, and you might be left behind if you don’t.

Note about “documents”: This book often refers to what you compose, generally, as a “document”—even if you are planning a project that is primarily audio (like a podcast) or electronic (like a webpage or video). In most cases, your initial draft or planning notes will be on or in a text-based document, and those plans can serve as your foundation even as you switch modes or genres.

Explore 8.1



Make a list of 4-5 recent situations in which you communicated something important or engaging to other people—in school or out of school. For each one, also briefly describe anything you included beyond text: that could be pictures, charts, or colors; it could be audio or video, it might include human voices or faces. Finally, for one message, indicate a *design choice* you made (or could have made): where did you deliberately include more or less of some element, carefully arrange the pieces, or add emphasis (such as volume or color) to your message?

Document design is multimodal

Communication scholars generally identify five common *modes*:

- A linguistic or **textual** mode includes written or spoken words
- A **visual** mode includes pictures, graphs, colors, lines, and fonts
- A **spatial** mode includes the size and arrangement of words, shapes, lines, or images, as well as navigation elements in an online text
- An **audio** mode includes voice, music, sound effects, background noise, and even silence
- A **gestural** mode includes facial expressions, gestures, body language, and interactions

Even your 500-word essay for your epidemiology class is already multimodal, since it includes text in a particular font that is arranged visually and spatially on a page (those famous “one-inch margins”), even before you add a graph or revise it into an in-class presentation. Outside of school, the rest of your communication with your friends, in your community, and at your workplace is increasingly multimodal.

While many of these modes can involve technologies, you don’t need a computer to compose multimodally: if you put pictures and text into a scrapbook, give a speech while you demonstrate how to clean a clarinet, or talk through your thinking while you solve a chemical equation on a whiteboard, you are combining modes to reach your audience.

Design throughout your composing process

What writers communicate is inseparable from *how* we communicate it, and so all of our decisions are influenced by our choices—or our avoidance of choices—about modalities.

- Modality is a **rhetorical** decision: writers will change both our content and our style depending on whether we have selected a document that has a strong visual or spatial modality. Similarly, readers (or watchers, or listeners) have strong preferences about what modes help them to learn, argue about, and enjoy new ideas, and writers need to adapt in order to connect with a chosen audience.
- Modality affects **subject-knowledge** decisions: even though an infographic focuses on information, it has much less analytical depth than even a short quarterly report, because writers need to emphasize visual and spatial modes. A protest poster is designed specifically to challenge assumptions, while a company home page has to present concepts that a wide range of clients will understand and agree with.

- Modality changes decisions about **steps and strategies**: writers who are composing a video blog will likely need some additional planning steps to address different layers (visuals, voice, music and text), while writers who are composing a poster or advertisement will need to organize spatially as well as sequentially to ensure cohesion.
- Modality connects fundamentally to **dispositions**: many writers find we are more motivated and persistent when we are composing using modes beyond text, since visual, audio, or spatial modes may be more familiar or intriguing. On the other hand, if you have not composed using video or audio editing tools, you may discover challenges to your confidence or time management.

Use reflective practice to make design decisions

Document design shouldn't be an afterthought—or reserved only for “special” documents in particular media. Since document design affects all angles of a writing project, you won't be very successful if you write all of your text and then decide that you want to squash it into an infographic or present it as a dialogue between two animated mice. Advanced writers should consider questions of document design throughout their drafting and revising processes—even if we are “just” writing an essay or drafting a brief presentation.



- **Consider design as you reflect to predict.** Writers should identify any design opportunities and evaluate resources during the planning stages of a project: will the writing benefit from visuals or other modalities, and does the writer have access to the resources needed to support the initial design plans?
- **Consider design as you reflect to problem-solve.** As writers draft a document, we might not take time to polish a design, but we can create placeholders or reminders about design elements that we have or plan to create. In this way, a draft might resemble a storyboard with notes about what visual or audio elements will eventually be included. Writers should also compose text that will meet approximate length, style, or integration needs relevant to the planned-for mode(s).
- **Consider design as you reflect to improve** your early drafts. Writers should adapt not just to fit the general rhetorical situation, but to integrate smoothly with any specific mode(s) or elements (layout, visual or audio components, color or animation) that are needed. Remember that revising can work both ways, adapting visuals or other features to the text, and also revising text to complement other modalities.
- **Consider design as you look ahead to future writing.** Writers should consider the impact of the current document's design and reflect on any

additional modalities, platforms, or design approaches that could enhance the original message or support the effectiveness of upcoming projects.

8.2 Design Across Modes and Genres

Decisions about modality underlie the success of any genre. Remember that a genre is not a *format* that is decided on once and for all, but a collection of expectations that readers and writers share, and that evolve over time and across different situations: not all quarterly reports or organization home pages are the same. A genre is always more than the sum of its modes: genres are defined by readers' expectations that influence the length, content, focus, rhetorical moves, and writing style as well as the mode(s) chosen by the writer.

But modes are crucial to defining genres. Often one significant part of what distinguishes print genres from one another is their use of different modes: poets often arrange their words spatially in lines rather than in the paragraphs that fiction writers use, and journalists use headline fonts and photographs to create a visual impact in news stories that is different from how professors write academic journal articles.

And writers who are composing in many contemporary genres—podcasts, social media videos, memes, protest posters, animations, webpages, online role-playing game plans, or advertisements—will often need to pay very close attention to the options and limits offered by the available modalities. Podcasters need to attend carefully to audio elements of their project, while game writers need to consider the interactions among visual, textual, and spatial modes. Especially since contemporary genres evolve so quickly, no textbook or handbook is likely to keep up with current practice: writers should take time to analyze recent examples critically before setting out to create their own.

Combine modes to expand, enhance, or reinforce your message

Although a picture may be “worth a thousand words,” if those thousand words distract your readers rather than helping them focus on your information or arguments, you have not improved your document. There's no real advantage to putting a picture of a cute puppy into your document explaining how home mortgage rates work just to catch readers' attention, since readers may focus on the dog and ignore your math.

You also want to be cautious about combining modalities simply to *repeat* your message. If you give a spoken presentation about how climate change affects small island states and provide a slide deck to go along with it, but you only read the words that appear on the slides, you aren't taking the best advantage of the combined linguistic, audio, and visual modes. Even worse, the visual may be

undercutting the audio, since most people read a lot faster than they speak, and so your audience will know your point—and start to feel bored—before you finish reading your slide out loud.

In the best multimodal documents, elements from different modes work together to create a whole effect that is more engaging, information-rich, and/or persuasive than a document that relies primarily on one modality. As you start to combine modalities, then, aim for combinations that do one of the following:

- **Expand** your message: when you include an audio clip of a Bach sonata as background to your report on seventeenth-century German culture, you provide information that no amount of text, pictures, or arm-waving could convey. As long as the new information is relevant, you should always look first for ways that the new mode can contribute in ways that are not available otherwise.
- **Enhance** your message: when your presentation slides include pictures of how rising oceans have affected towns on Tuvalu and Grand Bahama, you provide information that strengthens your description of how their lives have changed. You *could* describe the changes in words, but the pictures give a lot of rich, relevant detail very quickly.
- **Reinforce** your message: writers often use graphs and charts to reinforce key points of their research, while speakers use tone of voice and eye contact to emphasize how vital an example is. Reinforcement is slightly different from repetition when the new modality provides an alternate way of accessing information: a chart provides a quick overview of sprinters' injury recovery rates to reinforce your extended explanation of researchers' conclusions about new approaches in physical therapy for Olympic athletes.

Explore 8.2

Consider a school assignment you completed recently that was primarily operating in a linguistic/textual mode, and write a quick description of your goals or interests in writing and your instructor's expectations of the document. Then consider how you could have expanded that document with at least two different modalities: what *exactly* could you have changed or added (not “a video,” but “a video clip of a basketball playoff game”) and how would each of those have reinforced, enhanced, or added to the original message?



Practice

- To practice **analyzing a visual document**, see [Advertisement Analysis](#).
- To practice **analyzing a document** in any genre, see [Genre Ethnography](#).



Learn



- To learn more about analyzing a **model document** in any modality, see [Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project](#).
- To learn more about adapting **genres** across modalities, see [Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres](#).
- To learn more about selecting **writing moves**, see [Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves](#).
- To learn more about how your communication **style** adapts rhetorically, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).

Don't let tools drive your writing decisions

Writers can be inspired by opportunities to compose in new modes with new tools. We may see a vivid photo-essay about women doctors in Nigeria, or chat with a friend who is using a new app to sync his new rock song to a visual light show, or land on a web page that uses an especially graceful navigation system, and then want to create something just like it.

Advanced writers need to temper that enthusiasm with caution: video does not make every writing situation better, and last year's light-show app may no longer be the best tool for your current project. Tools are not neutral:

- If you select a specific infographic generator without completing a careful investigation, you may find that its templates limit your organizational strategies and thus interfere with your communication.
- If you choose an app that helps you record your interviews with classmates or co-workers, you may discover that the app does not provide sufficient privacy protection of your interview videos.
- If you select a specific website design, you could discover that it doesn't show up well on tablets or support screen-readers for audience members with visual disabilities.

Moreover, your decisions about message, genre, and modality should be recursive and open to revision. You might decide early in a project about environmental justice that you want to emulate the popular genre of a “TED Talk.” Then you will begin writing text, locating images for slides, and adding notes about how you want to speak and move during your presentation. At some point you will begin to re-evaluate your choices: you'll ask whether the arguments and examples you want to present still fit with the genre and modalities you selected—or is your document evolving toward something less performative and toward a more specific critique that would work better as an op-ed or a series of blog posts?

Tools and modalities should enhance your thinking and your connections to your audience; if they start limiting your goals or conflicting with your readers' or listeners' expectations, you should be willing to set them aside and make new choices.

Design using print and screen modes

The easiest modalities for most writers to step into are visual and spatial modalities, especially when composing for print or screen documents such as posters, blogs, social media, and webpages. After all, writers already use fonts and page layouts, so all writing already involves visual and spatial approaches. Moreover, since the start of the twenty-first century nearly all writers have embraced pictures and graphics as part of our daily reading and writing.

Attaching a picture to a text message or pasting a graph into an epidemiology report isn't necessarily *designing*, however. In the same way that writers work better when we have a mental model and some specific terminology, designers function better when we pay attention to precise aspects of visual and spatial modalities. You will make better choices in drafting and revising print- and screen-based documents when you consider the following concepts.

Foreground and background

When you look at a photograph—say, of a friend standing on a hiking trail with hills and trees behind them—the concept of foreground and background can seem obvious and natural rather than designed. Your friend, standing close to the photographer and clearly the subject of the photo, is in the foreground, and the trees are in the background. But foregrounding is a design choice: the photographer could have stood behind some trees and caught just a glimpse of the person, and so switched the trees from background to foreground—or crouched down and taken a photo of the person with only sky behind them.

In much the same way as you decide on a thesis or focal question for a writing project, you can select visuals—or arrange your own visual elements—to put some objects clearly in the foreground (stressing their importance) and others in the background. Background items are still present and meaningful; indeed, backgrounds can help designers create a mood, increase or decrease the tension of a document, or even make a subtle argument.

Emphasis and representation

A person or object placed in the foreground certainly gains emphasis—but designers have a wide range of visual cues to emphasize ideas. An object or word's size, font style or attribute (such as boldface or all-caps), color, or framing can add emphasis. The object or word's placement can add or subtract emphasis: items at the top or left-hand side of a page or screen often hold an emphatic, attention-grabbing spot.

A word or object can also gain an emotional emphasis: a surprising image (such as a drawing of a cow on a poster about star constellations) or an emotionally connotative image (such as a cute baby or puppy, or a picture of an emergency room) will call attention to itself more than other more neutral images.

What you *don't* include in your design can be as important as what you do include. If all of the people in your main photo are White or they all appear to be about the same age, readers from other backgrounds may feel excluded from your message. The same principle applies if your visuals are mostly showing a problem rather than a solution, or you provide illustrations of the first three steps of assembling a table but not the last two: readers may decide that your information is unbalanced even if your text is equitable.

Arrangement

Just as organizing your ideas into paragraphs helps readers follow your thinking, organizing elements spatially on a page or screen can either increase the coherence and flow of your document or interrupt it. As a designer, you should consider the following:

- **Placement:** readers in the US tend to start at the top and left of a page or screen, and then either follow an “F” pattern of reading across the top, then across (most of) the next line down, or follow a “Z” pattern of reading across the top, then skimming down to read across the bottom. Often designers will put vital information, vivid examples, or challenging arguments in a top-left position, and less important items further to the right and/or further down. Finally, some designers recommend following a “rule of thirds” to help guide viewers’ attention: divide the page or screen into horizontal and vertical thirds, and place key elements at the intersection points of those lines rather than at the center or along one edge.
- **Alignment:** items that are aligned with one another vertically or horizontally appear to belong together, and so seem cohesive to a reader. Rather than scatter photos or words across a page, designers align images to the text they amplify and choose a few strong vertical or horizontal lines of alignment. Research shows that left-aligned, non-justified text (with an uneven right edge) enables the fastest reading, and center-aligned text slows readers the most.
- **Proximity:** items that are closer to one another appear to belong together, and so seem cohesive to a reader. This is one reason you may feel comfortable letting your word processor put an extra space between paragraphs: the additional white space visually reinforces the cohesion of the paragraph, just as large “empty” spaces on movie posters help readers quickly distinguish among the movie’s title, its catch-phrase, and its starring actors. However, even small changes in space can cue readers to group items together or see them as separate.

Writers who are used to text-heavy documents are sometimes tempted to cram as many words as possible into a page or screen, but visual and spatial designers know how empty or near-empty spaces actually help a few words or images have more power than a large cluster of text.

Repetition and Contrast

While you are considering how to use space to group objects visually, don't forget about using other patterns to signal continuity or breaks. Any of the following items can be either deliberately repeated throughout a section or document, or selected to directly contrast with other items:

- Words or phrases
- Font type
- Font size
- Colors
- Shapes
- Logos, images, or symbols
- Line styles, thickness, or direction
- Background patterns
- Arrangements

To be most effective, repetition and contrast need to be *intentional*, *obvious* and *limited*. Since you are using these strategies to help readers organize their viewing experience, you want to repeat visual cues intentionally, precisely when you want ideas to connect. Thus you might use a red, all-capital-letter font to list the performance date of all three musical groups featured on your poster—and not use that same color+font combination anywhere else. To be obvious, don't try to contrast a square with a rectangle; contrast the square with a star and a triangle. Likewise, don't try to contrast 12-point type with 14-point type, or blue-gray with gray-blue: make your contrast more dramatic. Your repetitions should also be obvious: use the exact same cat photo rather than photos of six different cats, or repeat an exact shade of yellow.

In order to be obvious, both repetition and contrast need to be limited. If you pick 12 colors and repeat them all, your poster will just look like lots of random confetti; if you have eight different font sizes, readers will struggle to figure out which ones connect.

Visual and spatial designers often select one or two of these strategies as their primary tools for organizing their documents—yet good designers pay at least some attention to all four, so that a misstep in one area doesn't undermine our careful work with another feature.

Explore 8.3



Locate a print or screen advertisement (not a video) for a product you use frequently. Write four short notes to indicate one way that the advertisement uses each of the elements above: foreground/background, emphasis, arrangement, and repetition/contrast. Finish with a note: what design strategy most caught your eye first, and what design strategy most guided your attention as you reviewed the rest of the ad?

Learn



- To learn more about improving your **thesis or focus**, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **organizational strategies**, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).

Design using audio, video and gestural modes

Most of the approaches described for static print- and screen-based compositions apply to projects that move across time using audio, video, and/or gestural modes. Designers still want to consider what to emphasize or put in the foreground, and what to provide in terms of background. Likewise, when you cluster similar items together and provide visual space or silence in between clusters, you increase your project's coherence. Finally, when you balance repetition of key images or sounds with carefully selected contrasts, you help readers, listeners, and viewers stay engaged.

Although many current US college students have already created video or audio projects and shared them with friends, few of those projects were *designed*. In fact, we often praise recordings that capture the spontaneity of a moment. Yet the best audio and video projects aren't those that are accidentally captured with a mobile phone. Creating a spontaneous feel actually takes a lot of planning.

Rather than assuming that your podcast, video, animation, or oral presentation will naturally come together, you should set aside time for three kinds of additional planning, even after you have mostly identified your key information and drafted the overall organization of your project.

Plan in modal layers

While you can simply start talking to a group of peers or clients—or push one button to begin a recording—your presentation involves multiple layers of information across modalities. When you are designing for video or audio projects, you want to predict and control for all the information you collect and present, so that you don't end up with distracting, contradictory, or simply ineffective information.

Your project may involve some or all of the following layers:

- Background visuals
- Background audio from a recording site
- Background audio (such as music or sound effects) added later
- Lighting
- Camera angles
- A speaker’s appearance and gestures
- A speaker’s tone, speed, volume, and vocal timbre
- Slides, pictures, or other still images
- Animations or video clips
- Spoken or printed textual information
- Real-time interruptions from on-site elements (people, weather, noises)

It is not possible to monitor all of these at once during a performance or recording; good designers will take time to plan their strategies for key layers well in advance.

Plan for mock-ups and rehearsals

When you draft a document for print or screen, you can compose a whole draft and then revise most parts of it without much additional stress. After all, you can often change your introductory paragraph or image without having to re-do all the other pieces of the document. Unless you are an expert at editing video or audio tracks, however, redoing the first 30 seconds can be a daunting task—and if you’re presenting live, you won’t get a second chance.

Since a performance or recording has so many moving pieces, you’ll save time if you begin with a plan that is not yet even at the level of a full early draft, but is instead a rough mock-up. You might create a chart or table that explains what’s happening in different layers at key points of your project: as you present your introductory sentences, for example, what image, speed, background music, and/or gestures will best enhance your message? Alternatively, designers often use an approach called “storyboarding,” in which they use a combination of sketches, text, and production notes to help visualize and plan snapshots of several key moments of a project. You might want to pause at this point and get some feedback from peers: it’s a lot easier to revise a chart or a six-part storyboard sketch than it is to re-record a whole presentation.

Likewise, rather than completing a full project and then planning to revise if you need to, you should aim to rehearse everything and take notes on what to improve, especially if you will need to record or perform at a particular site, with other people, or within a specific time frame. Recording small bits and reviewing them is a lot more efficient than creating a whole production and discovering that the microphone doesn’t pick up everyone’s voice.

Leave time for timing

It can be challenging to add or delete content from a printed document, but it is often more difficult to adjust the length or timing of an audio, video, or performance project. Mock-ups and rehearsals can help you map out the overall length of your project, but you will likely need to have a plan and budget additional time if you want to coordinate how multiple layers of your project intersect. The more elements or layers you have, the more likely you'll need to plan for time to use audio or video editing software.

- **For an in-person presentation**, you may need nothing more than careful notes and good rehearsals to help you coordinate your voice tone and volume, your facial expression and gestures, and any slides or objects you need to share with your audience
- **For an audio recording**, you may need to practice your speaking tone and timing, and also align your voice with comments by any other speakers, or any music or other sound effects that you plan to include.
- **For a video recording**, you may simply record yourself presenting, and so rely on the coordination that is required for an in-person presentation. But if you are planning to integrate video clips or still images with your narration, or if you want to include background audio, you'll need additional time for editing and alignment. Remember, too, that if you're recording at a specific site, you might record some additional footage—from different angles, with different timing—to give yourself some options when you come back to put your whole project together.

Your presentation, audio recording, or video project doesn't need a lot of fancy graphics to impress your audience, and you don't always need expensive equipment to create a high-quality final product—but you will always benefit from completing several stages of planning before you get to your final performance or recording session.

Explore 8.4

Locate a print or screen advertisement (not a video) for a product you use frequently. Draw, print out, or open a document with a 3x2 table that covers most of a page: it will have six boxes that you can fill. Use this table to storyboard some ideas for converting this static advertisement to a video ad, with each box capturing about 5-10 seconds of an advertisement. Each box should include a phrase that should be spoken or viewed; a picture, stick figure sketch, or icon that indicates what viewers will see; and a note about any background music, images, colors, or sound effects that will also be present. Add a final note: which box seems like the quickest or most straightforward part of the ad to create, and which one would be most difficult or time-consuming?



Practice

- For more practice **analyzing genres and modes**, see [Genre Ethnography](#) or [Genre Triple Log](#).
- For more practice **shifting among genres and modes**, see [Genre Switch](#) or [Not-Talk](#).



8.3 Design for Diverse Users and Uses

When writers compose using primarily text, we tend to imagine our audience as *readers who are reading*. Books and essays seem to require people to sit in a quiet chair and absorb information. As advanced writers design multimodal texts in other genres, though, it may help to think of our audience as users, the way we commonly say that people *use* a map, *use* an app on their phone, *use* a company's website, or *use* a set of instructions.

You also know that outside of school, people are often doing multiple tasks while they encounter information or entertainment: they listen to a podcast while driving to work, scan social media while waiting for a dentist appointment, or search for online reviews as they glance at a menu. Finally, the *ways* people use a single document may vary widely: a few people will read the whole instruction manual or brochure front to back, but many more will scan it quickly when they need one particular piece of information.

Instead of imagining your instructor sitting at a desk with a red pen or online rubric, you may find it easier—and helpful—to imagine how many ways people will encounter, engage with, and *use* your multimodal document.

Design for multiple use cases

Designers often talk about *usability*—how easy or difficult it is to start and complete a task—and then about *use cases*, the wide range of ways that people will engage with a system, tool, or document in order to achieve their goals. This is just another way to talk about connecting with an *audience*, but this approach may help you vividly imagine how many people who cannot read your mind and don't have your same background or expectations will encounter your document.

As you plan your document, you might consider several elements of its use, including:

- The scene or location of use
- The user's activity before, during, and after use
- The amount of time a user will spend
- The user's assumptions, abilities, and goals

Suppose you are composing a flyer for a local political candidate. You might have volunteers who are handing out the flyer on campus or downtown, and you might mail the flyer to people's homes. In addition, some people who receive a flyer might be interested in the election already, and others not very interested.

If you were only designing for one use-case—a registered voter from your party who receives the flyer by mail—then you can make some straightforward decisions about presenting information in a way that informs your audience about the candidate. Since this reader is already interested and presumably has some time to look over their mail, you can include some longer stories or some specific descriptions of legislation the candidate supports. But if you plan to have the flyer handed out on campus, where your readers might oppose the candidate's views or simply not be interested enough to do more than glance over the flyer for 10 seconds as they stride toward the coffee shop, then you will also need some catchy headlines and visuals that connect to issues many voters care about; you'll also want to be sure that the candidate's name is easy to spot and remember, or the rest of the information will have no impact.

The more use-cases you can imagine and plan for, the more positive and widespread an effect your document will have.

Design for re-mediation across genres

It's not just audience members' needs that affect document design. As communication opportunities and modalities multiply, writers need to be able to adapt their messages to work in different genres and on different platforms. A contemporary political campaign, for example, has one basic message: elect this candidate because of their policies and goals. But you cannot just take a 500-word website statement of the candidate's transportation policy and send it out as a text message, a social media video, an answer at a political debate, and a T-shirt.

“Repurposing content” across different modes and genres sounds like a simple task that a technician could do, but it actually depends on an advanced writer reflecting on key goals and principles: addressing rhetorical questions about what the audience expects, considering subject-knowledge issues about how social media readers have different assumptions from website readers, drafting and revising the new content through a well-planned, step-by-step process, and managing disposition challenges such as allotting sufficient time and presenting a confident outlook.

And of course, repurposing requires strong design skills. Every time you change the modal blend or shift genres, you need to redesign the message to match the medium. Writers who can shift back and forth between genres and modalities will not only be increasingly in demand by organizations and corporations, but they will strengthen their overall problem-solving skills in ways that will benefit even their most straightforward all-text quarterly report.

8.4 Design Ethically

Advanced writers proceed ethically in many ways: we rely on credible sources and sufficient evidence rather than promoting rumors; allow research study participants (like interviewees and survey respondents) the opportunity for informed consent and privacy; acknowledge the words and information of other authors by citing our sources; and give our peers honest, constructive feedback when we review their drafts. As we expand the genres and modalities we compose for, writers need to continue to make ethical choices.

Design for accessibility

Often we think of “accessibility” as relevant only to people with physical disabilities. Certainly, part of being an ethical writer and designer is ensuring that your document is accessible to audience members who have visual or hearing disabilities. Your final project should thus:

- Provide captions or a transcript of any spoken words to support Deaf and hearing-impaired people
- Provide captions or brief descriptions of any image or graph to support blind or other visually-impaired people
- Create documents with text that can be accessed by a typical screen reader, to support blind or other visually-impaired people
- Avoid color combinations (such as red next to green) that people with colorblindness cannot distinguish

Beyond this level of accessibility, advanced writers should practice *universal design*: composing documents and other projects so that they can be accessed and understood by as many people as possible, regardless of their ability or disability, age, socioeconomic status, or location. Universal design is a natural extension of writers’ concerns about connecting with and engaging an audience: just as you organize your document so that readers can follow your points easily, you want to design across modalities so that all readers can easily access your document and its ideas.

Thus in addition to considering audience members with sensory disabilities, you could consider:

- **Technology access:** can your document or performance be seen on multiple platforms, even by audience members who have older devices or low bandwidth?
- **Location access:** if your project is posted to a physical space or online site, do all audience members have access to that site?
- **Language or culture access:** does your document rely on terminology, local references, or expressions that only a small “in-group” would know, or

can non-experts and audience members from different language or cultural backgrounds understand all of your key ideas?

While some of the principles of universal design focus on the physical accessibility of objects and buildings, several of them apply to the ways that readers, watchers, and listeners access documents:

UD Principle	Design strategies to consider
<p>Perceptible information: communicate information effectively, regardless of the user’s sensory abilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide descriptive captions of images • Provide transcripts or captions of spoken words
<p>Equitable use: provide the same or equivalent information to all users, and protect all users’ privacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide captions/descriptions of information as needed • Ensure that documents/videos/websites are accessible via mobile devices as well as larger-screened devices • Check whether audience members need to provide private information to log into a site hosting your document
<p>Flexibility in use: communicate in ways that allow audience members choice in how they read/watch</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide pictures or graphs alongside text so audience members can gain information in different ways • Ensure that audience members can access your project at their preferred time and at their preferred speed
<p>Simple and intuitive use: provide information that is easy to understand for all audience members</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t overload a project with complex transitions or distracting visual or audio elements • Use document headers and subheadings to help audience members quickly locate key sections • Limit the use of technical terms or culturally specific idioms

Design to acknowledge sources

As discussed elsewhere in this book, writers acknowledge their sources for several reasons: We aim to:

- **Demonstrate credibility:** “I’m not just making this up; real experts support this.”
- **Acknowledge others’ work:** “Six researchers worked really hard to create this study, and I want you to know who they are.”
- **Help readers follow up:** “If you want to find out about this in more depth, here’s where you can go.”

These principles hold true even as writers are working in new genres and modalities. Writers need to behave ethically with sourced material even as we make more complex decisions about what to acknowledge and how to acknowledge it.

What multimodal materials should be cited?

In your informal communications, you are part of a generation and a culture that frequently publishes and shares information without indicating its origins: you forward a video clip to a friend, re-post advice about brewing coffee, and transform a picture into a snarky meme, all without a long statement about the original author, publication site, and date.

In more formal projects, however, you need to build your credibility, help your readers track your information, and—wherever possible—ethically acknowledge that some other writer or artist put time and energy into creating original material. Thus, unless you snapped the photo, drew the tiger, composed the tune, or counted all the migrating birds represented in a chart, you should make a strong effort to determine who did. In addition to acknowledging the sources of your textual information, then, you need to be ready to identify the sources of any of these multimodal items:

- Photographs
- Drawings and clip art
- Graphs and charts
- Video clips of events or speeches
- Music, including background music
- Specialized sound effects
- Templates for slides, webpages, or infographics

Note about open access and Creative Commons materials: You may find a website that identifies its materials as free or open-access. Generally, as long as you are not using the materials—such as art, photos, music, fonts, or templates—for a profit-making item, you do not need to pay for or cite these sources (though doing so can still help your readers who want to build their own documents). You may also find some materials that have a [Creative Commons license](#) indicating whether you can use the material as-is, adapt it, or remix it, and whether you need to give full attribution to the original author.

If you cannot locate the original source—a meme has been circulating on the internet so long that nobody knows who started it—you should at least keep track of, and be ready to share where and when you accessed it. (But you might be surprised what a little detective work will reveal: many “anonymous” items turn out to have easily locatable authors.)

What do citations look like in multimodal projects?

Outside of higher education settings, almost nobody uses the extended system of citation you will use for your college writing, with both in-text and

end-of-document information. One reason for you to look carefully at other documents or projects in your chosen genre or modality is to find out what citation structure is possible and even preferred. Even if you find document examples that don't seem to acknowledge any sources, however, you should look for a way to acknowledge your source material so that you generate credibility, behave ethically to other information creators, and support your readers.

Here are four common multimodal source-acknowledgment strategies:

- **Journalistic in-text reference:** by inserting a brief phrase or two into the text you are writing or speaking, you can indicate your sources clearly enough that readers or listeners can see how credible your information is and even locate it themselves. News writers do this frequently: “According to the US Surgeon General’s office, . . .” or “Joy Johnson’s 2019 study indicated . . .”
- **Document hyperlink:** if you have composed an electronic document that uses sources or photos you located online, you can insert a hyperlink to take readers directly to the source: bloggers and social media writers use this approach frequently.
- **Fine print:** if you are producing a print or screen document, you can use very, very tiny type to indicate basic source information (creator and location or date of publication), either as you go or all at the end. Most readers will not be distracted by five-point sized type under a photograph acknowledging its author or publication, but readers who are curious will be able to get the information they need.
- **Closing statement:** if your document or project has multiple sections, you can consider using a final section or statement to acknowledge all of your sources at once, either through a formal listing like a bibliography or through a brief mention of authors and sites (think of how movies have credits at the end or how a brochure might list Additional Resources on the final page).

Learn

- To learn more about **identifying credible sources**, see [Chapter 20, Middle Inquiry: Finding, Evaluating, and Integrating Information](#).
- To learn more about options for **citing sources**, see [Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources](#).

