

Seeking Texts in All Available Forms: Invisible Writing and a New Reading Rhetoric of Sight and Sound

Kati Fargo Ahern

ABSTRACT: Basic writing students are faced with challenges as readers who must understand a variety of texts that fit into traditional notions of academic genres, but also negotiate self-sponsored, digital, and multimodal writing. Rather than focusing on specific acts or sequences for how to read, I argue for the metaphor of invisible writing as a new reading rhetoric to help student readers negotiate various types of texts and what makes those texts “invisible.” Invisibility is discussed in connection to definitions of writing, value, and productive potential. Finally, the metaphor of invisible writing is considered in concert with ear training. This use of sight and sound to reframe the process of reading is meant to offer basic writing teachers new approaches for the challenges of helping students understand multimodal and varied texts.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; composition theory; pedagogy; invisibility; reading; listening

In a recent article in *JBW*, Cheryl Hogue Smith notes the ways in which basic writers may suffer from “inattentional blindness” when reading. She recounts a classic study from the field of psychology where viewers could not see a person in a gorilla suit run across a basketball court because they were trying to count the correct number of passes made by players on the court (59-60). Smith uses this example to frame her discussion of basic writers as *basic readers*, unable to “see” elements in the text due to their focus on finding the “correct” answers. In so doing, she also notes that there is a long history of concern for basic writers as basic readers. For example, Marilyn Sternglass in 1976 called for composition instructors to focus more intentionally on reading (60), and more recently, Sheridan Blau found that students are most reluctant to engage in practices of *rereading* (emphasis mine, 61). “Behind all these arguments is the recognition that college students’ ability to write is limited by their ability to read” (60). Instead, students need to be taught to overcome their reluctance to reread, and resist deferring to “answers” within a text, by becoming producers of their own interpretations (65-68).

Kati Fargo Ahern is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Long Island University, Post campus. She conducts her research primarily in writing theory, sound studies, and multimodal and digital composing. Currently she serves as Chair for the Campus Committee on Student Writing, working closely with first year writing and writing across the curriculum faculty.

In other words, different reading practices could help students overcome their “inattentional blindness.”

What strikes me in this discussion is the way that blindness and sight are involved in metaphors of reading. On the one hand, this is not unexpected. We have a long tradition of visual-centrism in language connecting seeing to knowing. Phenomenologist Don Ihde cites Theodor Thass-Thienemann in translating the ancient Greek present form of the verb *eidomai*, meaning to “appear” and “shine,” and in the past tense, “I know” and “I saw” (6-7). Ihde reminds us that common contemporary English words such as “enlighten” and “insight” further demonstrate our relationship between seeing and knowing (8). Not only is the link between seeing and knowing strong, but Scott Consigny argues it has limited our possible interpretations. He is particularly concerned with contemporary translations of Aristotle’s definition of clarity (*saphes*). While we typically think of clarity as being visibly clear, like a window pane, Consigny offers another interpretation. Consigny suggests that *saphes* could be understood quite differently, where clarity refers to a bell, or a *distinct* sound, rather than a visibly transparent meaning (415).

Consigny’s rereading of *saphes* should serve as a reminder that while we do live in a world rife with visual-centrism, we could choose alternative auditory metaphors for knowing over visual ones. For example, the concept of clarity as *distinct* rather than clear could also be linked to another common auditory concept in writing—voice. Perhaps student readers and writers could be asked to *listen* for the distinct qualities of voice in a text rather than being told that their writing or interpretations must *appear* clearer. By linking voice to clarity as *distinct*, students may be better able to form connections between the voices they read and the goals they may have for their own writing. Furthermore, asking students to recognize the ways in which a text is *distinct* or distinguishes itself from other texts opens a range of possibilities beyond the idea of “seeing” an answer or position in a text. (I will return to this notion later with the metaphor of ear training.)

Still, we cannot deny the ways in which seeing has become metaphorically synonymous with knowing. When we use “clarity” in the classroom, we typically mean the students’ ability to work transparently with language or to “see” an author’s meaning effortlessly, not to distinguish original (or distinct) voices, moves, or symbolic choices. Yet, I am arguing here that this visual-centrism in metaphors of reading and knowing is something that could be both questioned *and* used productively with student readers.

As a teacher and researcher who typically does her work in sound studies, I am very much “attuned” to how students literally use different auditory

and visual practices to compose, as well as how sight and sound play out in our own ideas of reading and writing. In fact, my interest in auditory and visual metaphors is what led me to use the concept of “invisible writing” in my own composition courses to encourage student readers to find new ways to “see” forms of writing *as* writing. Invisibility still plays on many of the traditional and problematic notions of knowledge and sight, of which I have just noted, but what “invisibility” does as opposed to Smith’s “inattentional blindness” is reconfigure and shift the idea of a *lack* of sight or *lack* of perception from the reader to the text. Instead of a reader who suffers from “inattentional blindness,” not seeing a text, there might be a text that seems to possess (by virtue of authorial choice) some complex quality that allows that text to be undetected or unperceived as academic or legitimate. This shift is one of my main goals in working with student readers—to have students understand texts as possessing contingent, complex qualities that they as readers must seek out, perceive, name, listen for, and explore in their analysis, rather than to see *themselves* as so named, basic readers. Because metaphors are powerful ways of understanding ourselves in the world, the metaphor of invisible writing must first be explored theoretically, pedagogically, and politically, as well as in relation to actual responses from students reflecting on their experience with the metaphor in a course. Finally, alternative, auditory metaphors need to be considered, such as “bell-sound” and listening for writing and “ear-training” for reading, in order to further interrogate our epistemological possibilities and counteract exclusionary practices.

SEEKING ALL AVAILABLE FORMS

For a text to be invisible, it must simply exist in a way that we do not “see” it. While it might not *literally* be invisible, any text or genre may become neglected or be devalued in a particular setting. Additionally, invisibility is not necessarily a fixed quality. Something is not always invisible to all audiences or for all situations or at all times. Thus, résumés, cereal boxes, or *King Lear* could all be considered “invisible writing” based on definitions of “writing,” audience assumptions, or a community’s values. However, just because a text begins as a piece of “invisible writing” does not mean that it should remain invisible. Student readers must learn to read academic texts regardless if they fit comfortable traditions of texts or seem to be of value. Additionally, students will need to understand self-sponsored forms of writing, like recipes, slam poetry, and blogs as legitimate and complex texts. Finally, students must recognize *all* different forms of writing as contingent, social,

historical, and political. Only when students can appreciate all available forms of writing may they feel more comfortable negotiating unfamiliar reading situations, and potentially moving back and forth between different communities and practices of reading—from scholarly journal articles to social media or online, multimodal texts.

While contemporary students are sometimes given the label “digital natives,” extremely comfortable with technology and social media, students may not define digital forms of writing *as* writing. Andrea Lunsford reminds us that students often hold narrow and conservative definitions of writing, even within typically alphanumeric, inscribed composing situations, such as creating digital presentations or webtexts. When asked about their experiences in a newly-redesigned Stanford University Writing and Rhetoric course, students were unsure of whether they were simply learning new ways and media for “delivering” their writing, or whether they were learning more about writing (174). “In other words, they knew they were learning something, but many of them wouldn’t call it writing” (174). Lunsford’s students held onto more traditional notions of what it means to truly *write*, and those notions did not include using new media to make arguments. Lunsford was concerned with studying students as writers in the midst of confronting shifting definitions. But not recognizing a form or text as writing goes beyond labeling; it may also result in students not *reading* those kinds of distinct and unfamiliarly mediated texts as the kind of writing that they may be able to produce. Or students may not read those kinds of texts at all.

Teaching students to question and understand texts with unfamiliar design and composing choices expands students’ notions of what it means to compose and design their own texts. Not recognizing an opportunity to compose a text differently or a choice as a choice leads to what Ann Frances Wysocki calls an “unavailable design,” where a student cannot recognize a combination of composing materials and design possibilities (59). Unavailable designs are dependent on socially situated and historical conventions. They are made “unavailable” based on “what is expected by a particular audience in a particular context but also what an audience or instructor might not be prepared to *see*” (emphasis mine, 59). Thus students are taught habits of composing which continue to limit choice and force student composers to acknowledge fewer than “all available means” of expression. An “unavailable design” *for a reader* might also make students unable to “see” the full range of an author’s composing choices. J. Elizabeth Clark notes that counterintuitive as it might seem for a digitally raised generation, students do not always rush to the opportunity to create digital texts: “Far from embracing digital rheto-

ric, many students reject it in favor of a more comfortable essayistic literacy” (32). I have also found this to be true. When giving students an opportunity to create distinctive texts in forms less familiar than an academic essay, often less than a third of the class will choose to do so. Some have even remarked during the presentation of such projects that “they didn’t know they could do that” (for example, when seeing another student’s video-essay or a piece of interactive fiction). In other words, there are a variety of different forms of writing that may appear invisible to student writers based on what is also unavailable in their reading from a range of sources.

While student readers must learn to negotiate academic texts in their reading and writing, there are other situations or even other university courses where students will be *required* to adapt information for an audience outside of the university—one that would not be reached effectively through an “academic essay.” Reaching different audiences is not merely a consideration of delivering texts through different technology and new media, but also of teaching students familiarity with self-sponsored forms of writing. As Brian Street has noted, literacy is not and should not be viewed as a fixed, academic activity of reading and writing. Rather, studying literacy is “problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant” (77).

Other recent scholarship on self-sponsored literacies also emphasizes the need to offer students a more flexible idea of audience and writing as dynamic and adaptive. Shannon Carter discusses teaching students writing as a social practice of “rhetorical dexterity”: “I argue, [rhetorical dexterity] is a new understanding of the way literacy actually lives—a metacognitive ability to negotiate multiple literacies” and the acknowledgement that literacy is not all one thing (119). Carter’s approach recognizes that teaching students to write in one particular form or genre is not as productive as teaching students the ability to flexibly move between multiple, distinct literacy practices in their writing. These practices may also include writing experiences that take place outside of traditional university settings.

Kevin Roozen also recognizes the otherwise invisible nature of different forms of writing marginalized in university courses and why that invisibility can be detrimental. Through his study of his student Charles’s extracurricular engagement with standup comedy, poetry, and sports journalism, Roozen explains why we must make these forms of writing “visible.”

By not fully attending to basic writers’ self-sponsored literacies and their potential contributions to students’ academic writing, we reduce

Seeking Texts in All Available Forms

the scope of their literate lives and identities as literate persons to only what we see in their work for college courses. . . . By *overlooking* self-sponsored literacies, we also subtly but powerfully signal that such writing is not “real writing” and that such reading is not “real reading.” (emphasis mine, 100)

Our pedagogical choices to *overlook* certain literacies, or forms of “invisible writing,” serve as our own form of “inattentional blindness” to the variety of texts our students will be called upon to read and negotiate. By offering them a set of reading practices that encourage new ways of seeing a previously invisible form of writing, we enable students to recognize many distinct forms in the future—forms that include traditional texts, digital and new media texts, and students’ own practiced forms of literacy like poetry slams or standup comedy. Foremost, our students must also learn to push beyond the bounds of a single modality.

Even though we often think of writing as silent and visual, the history of composition also includes a strong connection to aurality, as well as new opportunities for digital technology to make possible combinations of auditory, visual, and gestural choices. For Cynthia Selfe, the historical and pedagogical developments which have occasioned a loss of aurality in composition have consequently silenced particular voices (632-636). She argues that the need to incorporate multimodality within the teaching of composition is by no means trivial. In her work on oral histories and the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, she continues to advocate for what she sees as the importance of multimodality.

By broadening the choice of composing modalities, I argue, we expand the field of play for students with different learning styles and differing ways of reflecting on the world; we provide the opportunity for them to study, think critically about, and work with new communicative modes. Such a move not only offers us a chance to make instruction increasingly effective for those students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but it also provides an opportunity to make our work increasingly relevant to a changing set of communicative needs in a globalized world. (Selfe 644)

Jody Shipka also argues that the relevance of multimodal composing is not based in merely adding different modes of expression (such as sounds or images) to “traditional” alphanumeric, print-based writing *afterward*, but

to view composing as an inseparable incorporation of modes, including the aural. In her book, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, Shipka's main goal is not to teach students a fixed set of multimodal composing processes but instead "to make the complex and highly distributed processes involved in the production, reception, circulation, and valuation of texts *more visible*" (emphasis mine, 38). Like Selfe, Shipka believes that authentic composing often crosses modal boundaries, and that multimodal composing allows student writers to draw on all available semiotic resources. Similarly, student readers must be taught to read multimodal texts as a whole, rather than trying to first isolate words from images, sounds, or gestures. The scholarship above affirms that students must learn to understand examples of digital, multimodal, self-sponsored, and academic writing, but introducing students to a single form of writing or how to recognize a single author's choices will not teach student readers the skills and experiences to be able to negotiate *all* available forms of reading in their futures.

While many of the scholars cited above rely on visibility as a metaphor for knowing (Wysocki—seeing, Roozen—looking, and Shipka—making visible), Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye get even closer to the idea of invisibility by stating: "Likewise, school-centered studies that go beyond the classroom *illuminate otherwise hidden* or undocumented scenes, actors, or acts of composition" (emphasis mine, 225). Each of these authors has anticipated the importance of the visual in understanding "invisible writing" by drawing on common visual metaphors that suggest many forms of writing have traditionally been made invisible in the classroom. All make a case for illuminating or uncovering only a specific kind of invisible writing, though. In addition to advocating for reading based exclusively on examples of "self-initiated" (Brandt 171), self-sponsored, digital, *or* multimodal forms, I argue that students must learn all available means of reading to make visible the texts that they will encounter.

INVISIBILITY AS A READING RHETORIC

The term "invisible writing" was originally used in the field of composition studies by Sheridan Blau to describe a particular method of drafting. Blau tested Britton's argument that one must be able to *see* during the writing process, by having students write with empty ball-point pens and carbon paper to confirm whether writing without the ability to see, scan, and monitor one's drafting process truly hinders composing (298). Surprisingly counter to Britton's original results, Blau found that "According to the participants,

the absence of visual feedback from the text they were producing actually sharpened their concentration on each of the writing tasks, enhanced their fluency, and yielded texts that were more rather than less cohesive” (298). In other words, far from preventing the writer from drafting, the “invisible writing” could in fact be *more* productive. “The invisibility of the words they were writing apparently forced the writers to give more concentrated and sustained attention to their emerging thoughts than they ordinarily gave when composing with a working pen or pencil”(299). Thus, Blau concludes that the process of “invisible writing” could be employed as a strategy for producing more confident writing (particularly for those suffering from writer’s block) by *temporarily* making the drafting process invisible to the writer (309-310). Using the term “invisible writing” from a reader’s perspective could also temporarily eliminate “reader’s block.” Smith discusses the reluctance for student readers to reread or form individual interpretations, but framing a text as “invisible writing” forces readers to approach the text as one that must be made visible through a form of active reading. Rather than assuming that other students can already “see” the text and understand its meaning, student readers are free to engage more confidently in the act of attempting to make what is invisible more visible or more understandable.

Essentially, the metaphor of invisible writing allows student readers to see themselves as seekers—people actively pursuing the task of making a form of writing visible to themselves. We have numerous cultural and childhood acts that draw on concrete, material memories of seeking such as peekaboo, Marco Polo, hide-and-seek, and *Where’s Waldo*. Additionally, smartphone apps, QR codes, and locative metadata reaffirm our sense that writing and information exists beyond the naked eye, and can be made present through acts of seeking. Thus, the metaphor of invisibility ties into the idea of what analysis does—it brings attention to some function or consequence of a text.

Seeking also allows students to inhabit a different identity toward reading. In order to become confident readers, students must form an identity as readers. Barbara Bird discusses the importance of identity for student writers: “If we want basic writing students to participate authentically and not resort to sentence-level mimicry, then we will want them to understand the purpose for academic texts and to self-identify with the academic community”(66). Similarly, if we want student readers to authentically engage in the social identity of academic reading, then students must *feel* connected to actively seeking in their reading. Like sentence-level mimicry, we do not want student readers to simply uncover some truth or “answer” within a text, but instead to identify as connected to an academic community of readers performing acts of discovery.

In addition to strengthening students' identities as readers and underscoring reading practices as acts of uncovering, the metaphor of invisible writing also emphasizes the ways an author employs choice in allowing a text to remain invisible or not to particular readers or communities. An author could choose to employ a new compositional means, blur the lines of a genre, or confront our traditional definitions of what it means to write. For example, an author of a video-essay or graphic novel may combine written words with multimodal and digital elements such as image, sound, and motion, which could necessitate new reading practices in order for us as readers to make that text "visible" to ourselves. These choices, while linked to an author's purpose, may shock, surprise, or unseat our expectations. On the other hand, an author might make choices that seem quite "visible" or clear to other readers, but we might not see ourselves in the intended audience for a text, and thus feel like readers whose needs were invisible to the author. These aspects of invisibility then are not a matter of student readers being unequal to the task of reading a text, but rather an acknowledgement that our reading processes must do some work in making a text visible.

Alternatively, invisibility could arise from a sense of implicit valuing or devaluing some forms of writing. Smith reminds us that "gorillas" are easy to miss and could elude any reader/viewer who is unable to notice them while preoccupied with counting basketball passes (59-60). Similarly, we as readers might not attend to reading or interpreting self-sponsored or extra-institutional genres, such as resumes, checklists, or order forms because we are looking for forms of writing that seem to "count" as "correct" academic writing. Research in New Literacy Studies and scholarship on discourse communities also understand certain forms of writing to be more visible or valued in certain communities or among members. Within any given discourse community, the forms of writing that are most present are the ones valued by and valuable to that community.

However, what makes "invisible writing" powerful is precisely its use as a metaphor. Students have a context of "invisibility," drawing on popular culture examples, as well as experiences of "feeling invisible." Additionally, they have a basis for understanding how things (like germs) are only invisible in certain situations, to certain audiences, or in the absence of certain tools for "seeing." (Sometimes these tools are literally for seeing, like a microscope.) Invisible writing is a concept that is at once understandable, yet multifaceted. Finally, "invisible writing" as a metaphor allows many different types of writing to be categorized under the same term. Rather than introducing texts as examples of digital media, multimodal composition,

business writing, or writing in/across various disciplines, I can say: “Here is another example of invisible writing. If this text is invisible to us, then why is it invisible?” As a class, by defining that type of invisible writing, we might also learn a bit more of how and why that form of writing became invisible to us; if it can be made more visible to us in our individual and institutional contexts, and even if we want it to be.

By framing each text as “invisible writing” and connected to our systems of value, I can both remove and simultaneously expose differing systems of valuation, not by placing more value on a text as self-sponsored or digital, but in making students aware of the weight or value we place, almost transparently, on some forms of writing versus others. Additionally, we can discuss how different forms of writing are given certain weight or value in different communities, situations, and settings.

“INVISIBLE WRITING” IN PRACTICE

In the fall of 2012, I first adapted the metaphor and theme of “invisible writing” in two sections of a beginning-level composition course on analysis, called English 1: Composition. Institutionally, the goals of this course are to teach students how to read various texts, engage in a process of analysis, and compose their interpretations of those texts. Because our institution does not offer a separate basic writing course, English 1 often meets the needs of students who might traditionally enroll in basic writing. The second course in our institutional sequence, English 2, teaches topics more traditionally found in a first-year writing course, such as research and argumentation. Every English 1 section at our institution includes the following three to four assignments: 1) one to two essays analyzing a single (verbal, visual, or multimodal) text, 2) a comparative analysis of two or more texts, and 3) an analysis of a text through the lens of the personal. Beyond these standard assignments, instructors are encouraged to select their own texts and approaches ranging from rhetorical analysis to cultural studies, literary analysis, and even quantitative reasoning.

I approached this course as an opportunity to truly expand my students’ understanding of what constitutes a text as well as how multimodality, materiality, digital media, and extra-academic communities might influence our analysis of texts. I wanted students to encounter their own dorm room/bedroom spaces as texts, see comic books and videogames situated within particular communities’ reading practices, and compare online and physical memorials as forms of writing. My course theme was explicitly named “invisible writing” and offered the following course description:

What “counts” as writing? For many of us, there are types of writing or writing practices that are “invisible.” In this course we will proceed through four units: private/family writing, commercial/entertainment writing, memorialized writing, and digital writing. We will explore texts that may have previously been invisible to us such as recipes, photo albums, videogames, online memorials, and finally the writing that we do online and networked to one another. Along the way we will make these forms of writing “visible” to ourselves and each other by engaging in four analysis projects. . . . (Course Description for English 1, Fall 2012).

The course description relied heavily on the idea of value/what “counts,” as well as some relationship or transition by which “invisible writing” as marginal or devalued could be “made visible” through our analytic acts of speaking, discussing, and writing.

The four formal assignments were as follows: 1) an analysis of a dorm room or bedroom (as an example of personal/private, self-sponsored, and multimodal writing); 2) an analysis of a videogame (as an example of commercial, digital, and multimodal writing); 3) an analysis comparing two online memorials (based on digital, multimodal, and public and commemorative writing); and 4) an analysis of a digital environment of the student’s choice (as an example of digital, multimodal, and potentially self-sponsored writing if the digital environment included a student’s own text, such as personal tweets on Twitter). Texts were chosen for the formal assignments based on the multiple ways in which they might cross divisions into unfamiliar or “invisible writing.” For example, the dorm room was personal, multimodal, and self-sponsored.

In addition to the formal projects, students also spent in-class time informally discussing a variety of other texts within each unit. For instance, the first unit on the dorm room also introduced the “invisible writing” of personal, private, and self-sponsored writing such as recipes, grocery lists, to-do lists, and family photo albums before proceeding with the first essay. Whenever we explored a new form of writing, I posed introductory questions such as the following:

- 1) What is the form or identifying features of this invisible writing?
- 2) Who is it invisible to?
- 3) Why is it invisible?

Seeking Texts in All Available Forms

In the third question I pushed students to consider whether a form of writing was invisible simply because we don't regard it as fitting the definition of "writing," or if it had more to do with us as an audience in the context of our university course, or the sense of value that we attached to a form of writing. Given that our beginning composition course focuses on analysis, our discussion then led to the role that analysis plays in making things "more visible." We discussed how the written nature of our analysis of dorm rooms could be circulated to other potential audiences, and how each new text we discussed became more visible to *us* through granting it our attention.

For most students, the dorm room represents a very particular type of text, often romanticized in its depiction in films as eager college students move in and customize their shared spaces. While our institution is largely a commuter school, we do have many international and student athletes who live in dorm rooms, as well as a growing out-of-state student population. For the purposes of our first assignment, I specified that students could choose to analyze a dorm room of their own, another person's dorm room, or their bedroom at home. I learned from reading my students' analyses that for many commuter students, the rite of passage into college also involved the further design/re-design of childhood bedrooms into a "dorm room style" even if these were not technically "dorm spaces" on campus. For those who did have dorm rooms, the norm seemed to be the traditional two-person shared spaces, though some of the international students or athletes were housed in suite configurations. For all students, though, the dorm room or bedroom represented a very understandable, definable personal/private space, even if shared with another person, and even if students would never formerly have considered those spaces to be "writing."

During their analysis of a dorm room/bedroom, students encountered several new and fairly common ideas that applied to most of their spaces. First, a dorm room is composed in a way that is personal/private and is not often on display to others. Second, it is an example of a self-sponsored composition. Composing one's dorm room is not usually connected to any sort of academic writing, even though the scene of composing takes place within a university. Third, a dorm room as a text is necessarily multimodal in that it involves different materials, furniture, and objects that contribute images, written words, and sounds to the space. To "see" the dorm room as a piece of "invisible writing" also necessitates students becoming comfortable with how an author could make choices that are aural as well as visual. Specifically, aural choices might involve the inclusion of sounds from music, television, or videogames, but also the way seating arrangements and

the spatial configuration of materials in the room encourage other sonic activities like talking, writing, typing, or silences. Fourth, a dorm room (like videogames and memorials) forces students to think about writing existing in different spaces and not merely on a page. In addition to the writing through sounds and images, traditional forms of writing might be found in scraps of paper stuck in notebooks, taped to walls, or called up on screens. Furthermore, the dorm room could also in theory be considered as a digital text in the way it is distributed to different audiences via FaceTime, Skype, or even still photographs.

The first essay asked students to take into account these multiple ways in which a dorm room (or bedroom) could be a composition that is private/personal, self-sponsored, multimodal, and even perhaps digital. In their essays students constructed arguments based on what they thought were the primary considerations the author or authors had made while composing those rooms as texts linked to identity, memory, or social purposes.

In some cases, students responded with hesitation with statements like “I didn’t think a dorm room could be writing, but I did ‘compose’ it. I guess I did author this space” or “I don’t think this is writing at all.” However, students did begin to appropriate words and ideas like composing and authorship, and began to take on an “academic reader” identity (Bird). Rather than trying to find “answers” in reading a dorm room, students began to identify as readers of texts who could make personal evaluations about whether a text counted as “writing.” Also, the very act of questioning what could be defined as writing led us to other interesting avenues of discussion. Talking about a dorm room as a text being composed also led to discussions on institutional constraints of dorm rooms, co-authorship with parents or rooms with multiple sibling authors, and expectations of genre and purpose. We also arrived at the conclusion that it was not only multimodal aspects of the dorm room that could make it an invisible form of writing. Even though recipes and grocery lists traditionally fit a definition of writing as “words on a page,” their self-sponsored quality could cause them to be invisible to us in a university setting as well.

After completing these formal projects, at the end of the semester students were asked to write informal reflections on a kind of writing that we did *not* discuss and that might still be invisible to them. I will now turn to these student reflections as they both echo and complicate some of the benefits of framing expanded views of writing as “invisible writing.”

ANALYZING STUDENT RESPONSES TO “INVISIBLE WRITING”

At the end of the course, as part of a series of reflection activities, students responded to a short reflection question about what forms of writing they thought were *still* invisible and why. I collected these responses because my interest in using “invisible writing” as a course theme was to expand students’ notions of writing and emphasize the variety of texts and composing situations that could in fact be read. These responses reflect the variety of texts that students might now consider as “invisible writing,” but also more importantly, their attitudes toward what makes certain forms invisible in the first place.

When setting up this study, I wanted to know more about student perceptions of the metaphor of “invisible writing,” so I decided to work with a very simple, open-ended prompt. The prompt for reflection was just “What genres or forms of writing have remained invisible [despite this course] and why?” I hoped that this question would prompt students to identify some of the reasons they found particularly resonant for why forms of writing might be invisible and to draw on their experiences of what they now recognized and might find invisible to others. Students were asked to write a few sentences in response. Since I gave this question to students in the last week of classes, they had had ample time to reflect on some of our previous activities and review the forms of writing we had discussed over the semester. In one sense, I was asking them what they thought had been left out of the course, but in another sense, I was also asking what could not be made visible in a course like ours and why. I was very interested in the last part of the question—why or how students perceived forms of writing to still be invisible. I did not want to ask students “Why are certain forms of writing invisible?” because I did not want them to feel like I was looking for one specific answer. I believed that by asking students about further forms of writing they perceived as invisible, they would feel more freedom to interpret invisibility in connection to their example.

Developing Codes for “Invisibility”

Strauss and Corbin’s “grounded theory” approach notes the importance and possibility for coding categories to be developed as they emerge within the data rather than necessarily being developed prior to data collection (274). “Grounded theory is a *general methodology* for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory

evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (273). In order to study my students’ responses about invisibility, I first developed a set of code categories such that each response could be assigned to a category. Cheryl Geisler discusses how coding schemes (or code categories) can be created in four different ways from 1) using a source (or framework), 2) using comparisons, 3) “intuition,” or 4) letting the scheme develop from the data (Bird 75). Since I had not been working with an existing framework or a single source for what the metaphor of invisibility might mean for student readers, I began to develop my code categories, or coding scheme, from two categories I expected to see through “intuition,” and remained open to any other coding categories that might emerge within the actual student responses I would receive.

I expected to see students respond to why a form of writing might still be invisible with either of the following: 1) because the form of writing did not fit people’s (typical) definitions of “writing,” or 2) because the form of writing might not be valued. I began a textual analysis with the assumption that most responses would fall into one of those two categories. I developed the two code categories as follows:

- 1) “Not defined as writing”—a response will fit into this code category if the reason given for a piece of writing being invisible suggests that people do not define “writing” to include that type of text: for example a text that would not be “defined as writing” could involve digital forms or sound, image, movement, and so forth.
- 2) “Not of value”—a response will fit into this code category if the reason given for a piece of writing being invisible is that people do not value this form of writing: for example people may not appreciate a given type of writing or see any reason to study it.

When reading through the data, though, it became clear that a third category was emerging from the responses. This third category of student responses focused more on the fact that a piece of writing could still be invisible because it was not meant for a public audience and/or it was somehow secret or *intentionally* hidden from particular audiences. By allowing the data to define this third category in the way that Strauss and Corbin suggest, I developed the following, third code:

- 3) “Not for audience, secret/hidden”—a response will fit into this code category if the reason given for a piece of writing being

Seeking Texts in All Available Forms

invisible suggests that the piece of writing is not intended for a general public or is secret and/or intentionally hidden: for example a piece of writing might be intended for specified audiences for some reason.

Having developed these code categories, I then proceeded to code the data and check my codes for reliability.

Coding Student Response Data on “Invisibility”

Twenty-three students signed a form giving consent for me to analyze their responses outside of our class. Although this is a fairly small number of students, my main goal in exploring these student responses as coded data was to find out what students found meaningful about the metaphor of invisible writing in relation to reading texts. While the genres and forms of writing that students found to be still invisible varied greatly from comic books to art, music, and Labanotation (a symbol system for notating dance choreography), their concepts of why texts were invisible fit into the three different code categories described above.

In order to code each response, I first isolated only the part of a response (typically one to three sentences) where a student discussed *why* a form of writing was still invisible rather than *what* form was still invisible. Then I began to assign each response to a code category. Once I had placed each student response into a code category, another coder used my code categories to independently assign responses to categories and we calculated our reliability scores.¹

Table 1 shows the distribution of student responses within each code category. I was most interested in the existence and confirmation of three code categories rather than a particular pattern of responses. Additionally, since there was a fairly even distribution of student responses among all three code categories, the data did not suggest that students found any one category more meaningful or prevalent than the other two.

Table 1: Code Categories and Number of Responses

Code Category	Brief Description	Example	# of Responses
“Not defined as writing”	The form of writing is described as invisible because it does not fit a definition of what it means to be writing.	“Music is invisible because people do not count it as writing” (response 21)	10
“Not of value”	The form of writing is described as invisible because it does not have value (in the university) or otherwise.	“It is invisible because a professor would not accept a flyer for a writing assignment unless one was taking an advertising class” (response 9)	5
“Not for audience, secret/hidden”	The form of writing is described as invisible only for particular audiences or people, and may further be seen as secret or hidden to the general public.	“I believe any for[m] of writing can be perceived as invisible or visible, depending on who the audience is. I believe that art is viewed as an invisible form of writing to the majority of the population” (response 2)	8

Because it was unexpected and included a fairly even distribution of responses, the most interesting finding from this small data set was the very existence of the third category, where students suggested invisibility could be based on audience, secrecy, and opportunity. While my classes had discussed the importance of audience, we did not typically discuss the productive potential or affordances of invisibility before, and when we had discussed audience it was usually in the context of a general or academic audience *not* valuing a particular piece of writing. We had not raised the possibility before that specified audiences might be privy to forms of writing otherwise occluded from the view of the general public. This was a quality of invisibility that occurred to students apart from any class discussion.

“Not for the Audience, Secret/Hidden”: Power in the Invisible

Since the third category was both unexpected and arose from students’ own interpretations beyond class discussion, I will focus briefly on that third code category here. *Table 1* shows an anonymous student response that helped to define the third code category based on the idea that art may be hidden from a general audience. Another response offered the idea of how a piece of writing could remain invisible to all but a specified audience through the example of comic books: “The audience for these are teens, children, or maybe even adults who grew up with the type of series. These are considered invisible because they contain pictures and have graphics and the subject matter is usual[ly] about super heroes and other fictitious events” (response 1). Here the student points to aspects that might be inaccessible to or *not intended* for certain audiences. Another student wrote:

Advertisements have invisible aspects to them. If it is a commercial than the actors might be speaking about a product but the company will hide certain hints into the commercial that appeal to the audience. Magazines consist of words and pictures. They also include different appeals so that the readers become attached, but these appeals are not always obvious. It is a new way of secretly communicating with the audience to make them connect with material either written, through a picture, or acted out. (response 12)

Here is also the idea of secrecy or invisibility that is of some advantage to the author. It is not the case that the author would necessarily desire for advertising to become more visible to a reader. Finally, another response points to the opportunity, potential, or power involved in being able to “see” a form of “invisible writing” unintended for all but a very specific audience: “Laban Notation is invisible because it was meant to preserve dance history if something were to happen where early dance movements could not be remembered or utilized. It is invisible to people who cannot dance and who cannot express their feelings through movement” (response 3). Again, this response identifies that there is a power for the potential reader, who is able to understand and see Labanotation, but no desire on the part of an author to make these forms visible to a wider public. Also, because we had never discussed Labanotation in class, this last response demonstrates how a particular student (most likely one of the dance majors in my class) connected the discussions from our class to other symbolic systems of ex-

pression she was aware of as invisible forms of writing. Unlike comic books or art, Labanotation was a form of writing *completely* invisible to any general public of non-dancers, and to me as well.

As a whole, the responses in the third code category revealed that students were thinking beyond the two reasons we had discussed for invisible forms of writing, based on definition or value. In fact, many of these responses confronted the “deficit model” of invisibility (as a lack in definition or value to be made visible) and instead returned “invisibility” to a quality involving possibilities or potentials. The tension between invisibility as a lack versus a potential was not only surprising, but also leads me to several points of caution for using the metaphor of “invisible writing.”

KNOWLEDGE, SIGHT, AND LISTENING IN “INVISIBLE WRITING”

While I have found that “invisible writing” gives students an easy frame for rethinking their process of reading and analysis, it is still true as discussed in the beginning that the metaphor contains a potentially damaging assumption of sightedness. In reconfiguring Smith’s use of “inattentional blindness,” “invisible writing” still draws singularly on one mode of perception, which is a problematic metaphor and a harmful position. Although I still favor the use of “invisible writing,” as a person who primarily studies sound in writing, I cannot ignore the ways in which even a *metaphor* of seeing is non-inclusive and may promote ableism. The same tension which makes an interplay of uncovering, seeing, and making visible productive, still encourages a reaffirmation of visual-centric notions of knowledge production that carries the risk of disenfranchising those with differing visual abilities or visual practices. Also, Ihde might argue that it is a rather post-positivist notion that assumes all of the ontological world could and should be made “clear” to us. Additionally, “invisible writing” may even lose its traction in a digital moment, which impels us to see forms of digital writing either through ubiquity or a materially visible instantiation, and hence do not feel invisible at all. (How invisible is a flashing street billboard, we might ask.) So, the question then becomes again, what is it that the metaphor excludes, and far more importantly, who may become excluded?

Another way to resolve this issue of visual-centrism could be to include listening as a metaphor when thinking about how to read “invisible writing.” Krista Ratcliffe has proposed just that in her argument for “rhetorical listening,” which asks a reader to suspend decisions, judgment, or “acts of saying” until having fully immersed oneself in a discourse and an ethics of listening

(202). While Ratcliffe argues explicitly that rhetorical listening is *not* simply a different attitude toward reading, rhetorical listening accomplishes the same goal in moving students from reading for “correct answers” to suspending judgment or interpretation until exploration has taken place. Rhetorical listening offers the additional concept of an ethics of interpretation which would decenter the position of the reader.

Ratcliffe developed “rhetorical listening” in order to help students pause before forming interpretations borne from personal experience without properly remaining “open” to a text, and she has applied the term *only* as a metaphor for listening rather than literally involving listening. Beginning readers do not usually suffer from being too sure of their own interpretations, though. In fact, basic writers often defer *too much* to what they perceive as the “answers” or others’ interpretations of a text (Smith 64). While the metaphor of “rhetorical listening” may help confident readers think about the presence of alternate discourses or decenter themselves from a text, student readers may only see “rhetorical listening” as synonymous with remaining open to a text, which is still a nebulous concept. Additionally, “rhetorical listening,” like “seeing” or “inattentional blindness” still places the emphasis on the student reader as being able to engage in an (appropriate) activity with the text. Since even the term “reading” itself can promote a kind of anxiety and reader’s block for students in basic writing courses, rhetorical listening may serve only to increase that anxiety. However, metaphors that tie sound to knowledge in the reading and understanding of texts are still a fruitful place for future exploration. For instance, in addition to Ratcliffe’s “rhetorical listening,” Hannah Ashley and Katy Lynn have argued that students learn to write in the university through a series of moves constituting ventriloquist writing or basic writing as ventriloquism. They suggest that students learn to “throw their voice(s)” such that “students recognize all utterances, even those that feel like ‘our own’ are a ventriloquist act” (24). While this still does not get to the idea of what would be entailed by “voice throwing” in reading or perhaps “voice recognition” as a reading metaphor, this is an area for further thought. Is there a way to teach reading as a practice of detecting voices that still feels concrete yet complex to students?

Another important critique for “invisible writing,” which came out of the student responses analyzed above, is that forms of writing that may seem invisible do not merely exist for the benefit of a university course making them visible. Though I introduced invisibility originally as a condition by which we could encounter texts, and make them more visible through our analysis, it may be the case that what is invisible can also hold its own po-

tential *for being invisible*. A text's invisibility is not necessarily evidence that it is being devalued. The very fact that the writing is invisible to us might actually leave open the possibility for certain transgressions, enactments of power, or opportunities for its intended audiences. We want to make basic writers comfortable in their acts of writing, but these may include choosing to make their writing "visible" to all readers sometimes, and withholding some forms of writing at other times. (How often have I said to myself that I'd like to "see," and by "see," I mean understand, my student's writing process? However, perhaps they are owed the dignity of not showing, exposing, or making that process visible at all times or under my conditions.) Perhaps some of what we do in introducing digital writing, multimodality, and self-sponsored forms to our students threatens for them the very authenticity of Instagram, bodily display, dress, or the construction of dorm rooms with a patronizing sense of privilege, as those forms are placed in a university context and so now are visible, or "valued." This is of course only a brief echo of what scholars of alterity, colonial literature, cultural studies, and indigenous rhetorics have been saying all along.

TOWARD A READING RHETORIC OF EAR TRAINING

Rather than abandon the concept of "invisible writing" altogether, I will conclude here with a possible addition. In response to Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening, and Ashley and Lynn's ventriloquism, I would like to briefly propose a means of hearing what is "distinct" in "invisible writing" by returning to the auditory realm and the idea of "ear training." Ear training has the potential to be applied both metaphorically and in a multimodal sense, but is also a literal practice that comes from musicology and music theory. In ear training exercises, musicians learn (or *train* themselves) to hear particular intervals between pitches, chords, or other elements of a musical composition. A similar term was proposed by R. Murray Schafer in response to the issue of noise in natural environments. Schafer argues that "The first task of the acoustic designer is to learn how to listen. *Ear cleaning* is the expression we use here. Many exercises can be devised to help cleanse the ears, but the most important at first are those that teach the listener to respect silence" (emphasis original, Schafer 208). Ear training is similar to ear cleaning, except in being tied to the traditions of musicology and a process of *learning* to listen rather than purifying listening (through "cleaning" or "cleansing"), ear training remains more related to "reading" than associations with value. Additionally, similar to the student reader who learns to

Seeking Texts in All Available Forms

seek “invisible” forms of writing, ear training offers a concrete but extendable set of practices for learning to literally *and* metaphorically listen.

Ear training is analogous to the process of *rereading*. Ear training does not assume that we can listen to a text or hear the “invisible” aspects the first time. It is also tied to both an auditory experience and a visual notion of reading music. Reading a musical composition and *seeing* when a note is written flat outside the normal tonality of the key signature, or when a voice part has a suspension that resolves a chord, is also intimately involved in being able to *listen for* and hear that moment. So, ear training does not occur normally in isolation or in a singular, auditory mode, but in relation to the visual aspects of a musician reading music. Additionally, ear training is a metaphor and practice that works in concert with Consigny’s notion of clarity as distinct—as bell sound. Ear training focuses on the reader’s ability to listen for and decipher which “bell” is being rung (whether the “bell” is an oboe, an interval, or a chord). Metaphorically, ear training is also a concept that can help unite other auditory metaphors we have for writing such as identifying distinctions in voice, dissonances in writing, and structural, visual, and auditory concepts of point and counter-point. Like “invisible writing,” teaching students to read as ear training emphasizes the process and practices by which students make texts, in this case, “audible” in a specific way. It does not assume that texts are heard in the same way for each audience or that authors make each text heard through the same choices. A reading pedagogy of ear training might entail any of the following: 1) listening to the diageitic and extradiageitic sounds composed in a videogame soundscape 2) charting words that indicate certain tones (or “emotional pitches”) in a verbal text, or 3) constructing a map of spatial/visual features in a website that create a distinctive visual voice (whether those features owe to color, font, or image choices). Ear training could encompass activities of listening, rereading, re-looking, re-witnessing, and breaking down parts of a text in order to identify what we hear.

Of course, ear training as a metaphor is still susceptible to some of the same critiques of exclusion as invisibility. We as instructors must be careful not to reify any mode or experience of a text exclusively at the risk of limiting student experience or promoting ableism. However, ear training as both a metaphor and a literal practice does provide a possibility to intentionally offer a more multimodal attitude toward reading as an interplay among hearing, seeing, and sensing invisible forms. Sound scholars, such as Steph Ceraso, have proposed listening as not just connected to the ears, but as implicated in a larger multimodal and material array of bodies, spaces, and sonic

experiences. In fact, Caraso proposes and theorizes the term "multimodal listening" to emphasize the integrated nature of sonic experience (103). As students begin to understand their experience of texts as more embodied, they are in turn able to build their social identities as academic readers based on the promise of subjective interpretation.

Perhaps by introducing students to ear training as a means for hearing the "invisible," we will begin to get closer to not only seeing the "gorillas" that Smith laments that our student readers often miss, but also to hearing, sensing, and feeling their subtle tread. As Smith says,

By shifting [student readers'] focus from their insecurities to the transaction they experience with difficult texts, they will learn to see through the mist to capture glimpses of the gorillas that appear before them—even if they see those gorillas as chimpanzees or orangutans or even if they, at first, mistake them for lions. (Smith 75)

Similarly, I am not so much concerned with ear training as a means for "correctly" identifying literal or metaphorical pitches, but as a new means and attitude toward hearing as another reading practice of attending, witnessing, and uncovering.

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE—POST SCRIPT

At the time of writing this article, I have taught English 1 using "invisible writing" for a third year. I have made some revisions in terms of the exact forms of writing we analyze, but I have also played intentionally with unseating the metaphor of invisible writing as the course progresses. For instance, during fall of 2013, one of the last formal projects involved students analyzing how sounds compose places by selecting two sounds that function differently in the same public space. (An example is how a whistle sound functions differently from cheering in a sports arena or how laughter versus whispering functions in a movie theater.) With this unit I also introduced discussion on the limits of "invisibility" as a metaphor, encouraging how an act of analysis as "uncovering" the invisible could be translated to other senses and ways of knowing, such as ear training, inscribing, recording, or witnessing. This past fall of 2014, students went further with the idea of reading as listening or witnessing by collecting "listening data" of ten experiences of "listening to music in an unlikely context" (like a television series or a casual Italian restaurant) as an alternative way to analyze how

sound composes spaces. For this project, students selected spaces or listening contexts from the gym to the supermarket, *American Horror Story*, or fantasy RPGs and then collected ten listening experiences based on music and its function within the space or context. In order to prepare for this project, we first engaged in ear training activities that were both literal and metaphorical, such as the ones suggested above.

If the end goal of basic writing is to make students more aware, sensitive, and *in control* of their own literacies and composing choices (Carter's "rhetorical dexterity"), then student readers need to find new ways of reading that are flexible and multimodal, and which help them to build their own reader identities. Reading must be presented as a practice that does justice to authorial choice and reader complexity, rather than holding to a romanticized notion of hide-and-seek or Simon Says. Instead, students must be afforded the opportunity to genuinely understand the choices of others so that they might in turn choose to "shout" their own writing choices to reader-listeners or else at other times *choose* to withhold, and remain "invisible," "silent," or unperceived.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my students over the past three years who have taught me so much about the use of the metaphors described in this article. Also, many thanks to Hope Parisi for all of her substantial, generous, and patient feedback.

Notes

1. The second coder's assignment of responses to categories matched mine with a simple reliability of .83 and a Kappa Coefficient for inter-code reliability of .61.

Works Cited

- Ashley, Hannah, and Katy Lynn. "Ventriloquism 001: How to Throw Your Voice in the Academy." *Journal of Basic Writing* 22.2 (2003): 4-26. Print.
- Bird, Barbara. "A Basic Writing Course Design to Promote Writer Identity: Three Analyses of Student Papers." *Journal of Basic Writing* 32.1 (2013): 62-96. Print.
- Blau, Sheridan. "Invisible Writing: Investigating Cognitive Processes in Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 34.3 (1983): 297-312. Print.

- Brandt, Deborah. "Sponsors of Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 49.2 (1998): 165-85. Print.
- Carter, Shannon. "Redefining Literacy as Social Practice." *Journal of Basic Writing* 25.2 (2006): 94-125. Print.
- Ceraso, Steph. "(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences." *College English* 77.2 (2014): 102-23. Print.
- Clark, J. Elizabeth. "The Digital Imperative: Making the Case for a 21st-Century Pedagogy." *Computers and Composition* 27 (2010): 27-35. Print.
- Consigny, Scott. "Transparency and Displacement: Aristotle's Concept of Rhetorical Clarity." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 17.4 (1987): 413-19. Print.
- Fishman, Jenn, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye. "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 57.2 (2005): 224-52. Print.
- Ihde, Don. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. Second. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Print.
- Lunsford, Andrea. "Writing, Technologies, and the Fifth Canon." *Computers and Composition* 23 (2006): 169-77. Print.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct.'" *College Composition and Communication* 51.2 (1999): 195-224. Print.
- Roozen, Kevin. "Comedy Stages, Poets Projects, Sports Columns, and Kinesiology 341: Illuminating the Importance of Basic Writers' Self-Sponsored Literacies." *Journal of Basic Writing* 31.1 (2012): 99-132. Print.
- Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994. Print.
- Selfe, Cynthia. "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 60.4 (2009): 616-63. Print.
- Smith, Cheryl Hogue. "Interrogating Texts: From Deferent to Efferent and Aesthetic Reading Practices." *Journal of Basic Writing* 31.1 (2012): 59-79. Print.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. "Grounded Theory Methodology: An Overview." *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994. 273-85. Print.
- Street, Brian. "What's 'New' in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice." *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 5.2 (2003): 77-91. Print.