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# Thinking Beyond Tools: Writing Program Administration and Digital Literacy

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## THINKING BEYOND TOOLS: WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION & DIGITAL LITERACIES

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JENNA PACK SHEFFIELD, UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAVEN

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"I think digital writing (like blogs, for example) is **over-rated**. Far more important to me as WPA is the training of good teachers."

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"I don't see how one could have a **responsibly-constructed writing program** that didn't include interacting with and composing texts in a range of digital environments."

"A writing program that ignores or **minimizes digital literacy** simply **isn't exercising responsibility** towards its students."

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"I sound really **cranky**, but while...our writing for electronic media class...is well-subscribed, expanding our objectives for first-year comp in particular seems to be a **misplaced ambition**."

—survey respondents



## Introduction

Much scholarly attention in the computers and writing community has been paid to the theory and practice of integrating digital technologies in individual writing classrooms.

A variety of *Computers and Composition Online*

webtexts, for example, describe individual instructors' innovative digital assignments, such as

[Prezi Literacy Narratives](#) and [machinima video](#)

(Lafren, 2014; Remley, 2012), as well as how

instructors are engaging students in explorations of

new literacies, such as [video games and fan fiction](#)

(Arduini, 2014). Not only have individual teachers

integrated digital literacies into their courses, but

professional organizations in rhetoric and

composition have issued policies and statements to

support movements toward digital and multimodal

literacies. For example, the [Framework for](#)

[Success in Postsecondary](#)

[Writing](#) (2011) includes an entire section on

"Composing in Multiple Environments" with tips for how teachers can help "writers develop as thoughtful, effective users of technology" and foster habits of mind, such as curiosity and creativity, which may require or be enhanced through digital literacies (p. 10).



Yet, less attention has been paid specifically to writing program administration and its relationship to digital or multimodal literacies, particularly in quantitative/qualitative research studies. The programs that, as writing teachers, we teach in—and the administrators of those programs—often have a significant influence on the assignments we can teach, the outcomes we are working towards, and the technologies to which we have access. As such, it is important to examine program administration since it can support or inhibit instructors' efforts. Looking at the relationship between digital literacy and writing program administration from a [multiliteracies](#) perspective, as this study does, encourages implementations of digital literacy that move beyond the use of tools (for example, showing instructors how to use a program's e-portfolio tool during teacher training) to more theoretical and practical considerations of how digital literacies converge with and change writing.

In considering the relationship between technology and administration, some scholars have advocated for administrators who are more technologically knowledgeable, who are willing to embrace complex forms of writing and think critically about the intersections of technology and administration (Day, 2009; Dobrin, 2011; Kimme Hea & Turnley, 2010; Leverenz, 2008). A few researchers have also begun to offer narratives of how their own programs have moved towards multimodal composing or technology integration (Adsanatham et al., 2013; Huot & Takayoshi, 2009). My research builds on these local narratives by describing trends across many programs. Drawing on survey data from 70 Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), I describe how digital literacy is being theorized and practiced in a broad range of writing programs across the U.S. Because this study offers a glimpse of values and practices across programs with a variety of resources and challenges, the study results—which demonstrate in what ways WPAs value and are integrating digital literacies—can help other WPAs

argue for resources, get ideas, defend practices in their own programs, or ensure that students in their programs will receive similar experiences as others across the country. At the same time, while my study showed that many WPAs value digital literacies, it also revealed some areas for further consideration—elements WPAs who are committed to digital literacy may need to focus on more as they move forward with their approaches. As I discuss some areas in which WPA practices do not necessarily align with current values in the field of computers and composition, I offer strategies for adopting best practices in the field while facing some of the challenges with which WPAs contend on a daily basis, such as a lack of resources or stakeholder resistance.

This study does not only have implications for those involved in program administration, however. Teachers who are invested in digital literacy can also gain valuable knowledge from learning how WPAs are supporting teachers and from learning about examples of critical, rhetorical, and ethical instantiations of digital practices at other programs. They can, in turn, make arguments for different types of resources, assignment requirements, or training practices in their own programs or work with others in their program to ensure that implementations of digital literacies are more robust than mere **functional** approaches.

This webtext begins with a brief discussion of the **theoretical framework** I used for the study. Then, I share details about the survey **population**. The rest of the webtext presents my **findings**, characterizing WPAs' **motivations** for integrating digital literacy into their programs, the **challenges** they face in their attempts, and the ways in which they are **interpreting** digital literacy. I end by discussing the **implications** of the survey data for writing program administration.

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## Research Questions

Here, I share the research questions that guided my study:

- Are WPAs pursuing digital literacy programmatically, and how is it being instantiated across programs?
- What are the motivations underlying programmatic implementations of digital literacy in writing programs, and how are WPAs interpreting and representing digital literacy? To that end, what are the dominant discourses of technology underlying these representations?
- Are writing programs aligning with rhetorical, functional, critical, or ethical (multiliteracies) approaches to digital literacy, and how are these approaches manifested in programmatic discourses and practices?
- How can WPAs support sustainable approaches to digital literacy in their programs?

Theory



## THINKING BEYOND TOOLS: WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION & DIGITAL LITERACIES

### Theory

Computers and composition scholars have regularly critiqued deterministic narratives of technology that construct them as either neutral tools or autonomous cultural forces (Duffelmeyer, 2000; Johnson-Eilola, 1997; Kimme Hea, 2002; Selfe, 1999; Turnley, 2011). Rejecting these narratives, scholars such as Andrew Feenberg (1991) have instead argued for a critical theory of technology. Feenberg's critical theory of technology sees technology as an "ambivalent process," where technology is not neutral but is not taking us over, either (pp. 14-15). In other words, in Feenberg's view, human action can effect change in technological environments.

In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber (2004) drew on scholars such as Feenberg and Bryan Pfaffenberger to argue that English studies students in a digital age need to become critically literate digital citizens. In other words, instead of just learning how to functionally use a technology, students also need to be able to critically analyze it and approach it rhetorically. Many computers and composition researchers have used Selber's multiliteracies—functional, critical, and rhetorical—to describe the literacies students need to communicate with and through new media, also extending the theories beyond Selber's focus on the computer and the interface to a range of composing technologies (Ballentine, 2009; Coley, 2012; DeVoss, Eidman-Aaddahl & Hicks, 2010; Stewart, 2014).

This concept of multiliteracies has become somewhat of a commonplace in the computers and composition scholarship. Most scholars committed to digital writing, particularly, acknowledge that writing teachers need to "develop practices that attend to the wide range of *functional, critical, and rhetorical* [emphasis added] skills that digital writing demands," as the National Writing Project argued (2010), in conjunction with Danielle DeVoss, Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, and Troy Hicks (p. 13). Yet, while many in the field seem to accept these literacies as a given, we have not yet fully explored the ways in which these literacies are being instantiated programmatically in teacher training or curricular development.

For Selber, as shown in table 1, *functional* computer literacy employs the tool metaphor, in which computers are neutral tools for our uses. This approach masks the social and political dimensions of technology. Selber noted that while it is dangerous to view literacy "as a set of value-free skills," functional literacy can be framed in a positive light if it's discussed in the service of English studies students being able to control technological resources and understand the ways communication activities are organized in online environments—in order to compete for work in a digital age and enact change (p. 27).



Table 1

Selber's Multiliteracies

METAPHOR	SUBJECT POSITION	OBJECTIVE	EXAMPLE
<b>FUNCTIONAL</b>			
Computers as neutral tools	<i>User of technology</i>	Effective employment	Learning advanced features of a software program
<b>RHETORICAL</b>			
Computers as hypertextual media	<i>Producer of technology</i>	Reflective praxis	Designing several versions of the same website
<b>CRITICAL</b>			
Computers as cultural artifacts	<i>Questioner of technology</i>	Informed critique	Analyzing the sociocultural values embedded in digital composing environments

\*Adapted from Stuart Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* p. 25

Regarding *critical* digital literacy, Selber claimed that students should be encouraged to recognize and question the politics of computers. Critical digital literacy employs the metaphor of computers as cultural artifacts, which “encourages attention to the non-neutral dimensions of computers and their non-neutral contexts” (p. 86). Students might be encouraged to analyze online environments, software, or hardware programs, asking who profits, who is left behind, and what values are embedded in these environments.

*Rhetorical* literacy positions students as not just consumers but as producers in computer-based environments. According to Selber, students should recognize the persuasive dimensions of electronic environments and of their designs in these environments. This requires students to reflect on their designs and consider ways to act in the world through those designs. Selber claimed that the rhetorical approach is a combination of functional and critical approaches.

While Selber's book discusses highly technical courses, such as software documentation writing, and provides examples that are beyond the scope of many composition courses such as first-year writing, many scholars still adapt his theory as a loose framework for seeing computer literacy as multi-faceted and more than a technical skill.

While Selber's theory has become valued in the field, Toby Coley (2012) identified what he believes to be a gap in Selber's framework, suggesting that **ethical** literacy should be the "fourth multiliteracy" (p. 13). Based on case studies and survey research, Coley argued that when writing teachers teach with digital media, they should teach students to understand the audience's values and beliefs; they should construct safe digital environments for students and give them choices for the digital tools they use; and they should emphasize academic integrity, teaching students how to properly cite and evaluate information found in digital sources. He also essentially argued that administrators are ethically obligated to engage students in Selber's multiliteracies, from functional skills to analyzing the social implications of digital texts.

While I use Selber's multiliteracies as the theoretical framework through which I interpret how digital literacy is being instantiated and interpreted in writing programs, I also include ethical digital literacy as a fourth multiliteracy. While I find that some of the obligations discussed by Coley overlap with Selber's other multiliteracies, Coley has provided a useful category that requires attention, allowing more consideration of the audience's values and academic integrity.

Respondents



## Respondents

The survey was designed to gather information about WPAs' programmatic commitments to **digital literacy** (the focus of this webtext) as well as to gather background information to contextualize an analysis of writing program websites (a discussion beyond the scope of the present text). Respondents were informed that the survey was concerned with the relationship between digital technology integration and writing program administration, and they were asked to consider their overall program goals, Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), and the trajectory of their curriculum in their responses—all to ensure the study was focused on program-wide implementations rather than the efforts of individual teachers.



**Digital Literacy:** the practices involved in exchanging, reading, and writing in electronic environments, along with the values that are associated with these practices— cultural, political, educational, and social (Hawisher and Selfe, 2004, p. 2).

\*Note: I used "digital literacy" rather than **multimodal composing** because I felt digital literacy would be more relatable for all respondents and would allow me to examine not only composing but also analysis practices. Also, some scholars have argued that multimodal composing does not have to be digital, so choosing digital literacy allowed me to retain a focus on digital technologies.

To determine the total population to which I would send the survey, I first established criteria that defined a writing program for this study. First, I chose to make First-Year Composition (FYC) central to my definition of a writing program. FYC can be seen as a cornerstone of higher education in the US, and in most schools, the majority of students take FYC, which means this is where the bulk of a school's students are provided support for their writing. Additionally, the administration of first-year writing programs is "the most common kind of WPA work," according to Susan McLeod (2007, pp. 3-4). For these reasons, I selected FYC as an important site of study since the focus of the study was on program administration. Because of this focus on administration, I also decided to select programs that self-identified as a rhetoric, writing, and/or composition program or department. By self-identifying as a "program" or "department," a writing program is an entity that may be part of, but is not subsumed by, an English Department. This enabled me to remove English Departments that offer writing courses but do not have an actual composition program. Additionally, the program needed an administrator—a WPA, Coordinator, or Director of writing courses.

While my goal was to include as many **writing programs** as possible in this study, delineating these criteria (summarized to the right) enabled me to find some consistency across the participants for the purpose of comparison.



I consulted two national lists (the then-current (February 2014) list of individual Council of Writing Program Administrators members and a list of class sizes for writing courses collected by Richard Haswell from the WPA listserv) in an effort to discover writing programs at as many schools as possible that had WPAs. I then applied the criteria to the members of these lists. I searched each school's website as thoroughly as possible, looking for any mention of a WPA or coordinator not only on the writing program's website but on department faculty lists; searching through course catalogs for first-year writing courses, and so forth. One potential limitation to the process is that a more robust program website might equate with a WPA more invested in digital literacies; however, my search of course catalogs and faculty listings was intended to broaden the search beyond the writing program webpage itself. In the event any of my criteria were not clear by looking at a website, I contacted the English department to determine if the program met the criteria. The process yielded **152** writing programs.

I sent an individual email to the WPA of each of the programs, asking him or her to respond to the **survey**. The emails were sent between March 10th and March 26th of 2014, in the middle of the flow of the academic year for most schools, and I asked for completion of the survey by April 11, 2014.

**Seventy** WPAs fully completed the survey, for a **46% response rate**.

**Writing Program:** A program dedicated to the teaching of writing, rhetoric, and/or composition that

- hosts first-year writing
- self-identifies as a program or department
- has an administrator, such as WPA or coordinator

**Survey:** Please view the survey at [this link](#).

Of the larger population—the 152 programs that met all criteria—there was a bias toward research-oriented institutions and 4-year public schools. The distribution was fairly even across geographic regions, and the majority of the schools' population sizes were between 5,000 and 25,000. As I had hoped, the 70 respondents represented a vast range of programs—varying in size, research focus, and geographic location (see Table 2). Again, there was a bias toward research-focused institutions, with 69% being doctorate-granting institutions according to Carnegie classifications. Institution type and geographic location were fairly representative of the larger population, and institution size varied significantly, providing a broad range of programs to examine.

Table 2: Respondent Population

CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION (BASIC)*		INSTITUTION SIZE	
Spec/Health: 1		1-4,999: 2	
Assoc/Pub-R-L: 2		5,000-9,999: 11	
Bac/Diverse: 1		10,000-14,999: 14	
Bac/A&S: 1		15,000-19,999: 12	
Master's S: 2		20,000-24,999: 12	
Master's M: 2		25,000-29,999: 8	
Master's L: 13		30,000-34,999: 5	
DRU: 6		35,000+: 6	
RU/H: 21			
RU/VH: 21			

INSTITUTION TYPE		GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION	
Public, 2-year: 2		West: 16	
Private, 4-year: 20		Northeast: 17	
Public, 4-year: 48		Midwest: 18	
		South: 19	

\*Definitions of Carnegie Classifications can be found [here](#). I classified the programs based on how they were categorized during the time of the survey. With the 2015 classification update, a few titles have now changed, such as RU/VH, which is now R1.

The majority of the WPAs surveyed (**over 50%**) hold **degrees in rhetoric and composition**. The second most common educational background was a degree in English literature (at 24%).

Thirty-two (45.7%) of the programs represented by WPAs in the survey are solely first-year composition programs. Twenty-seven (38.6%) are undergraduate writing, rhetoric, and/or composition programs that host first-year writing along with other courses. Seven of the respondents (10%) are administrators of entire Departments or Schools of Writing and/or Rhetoric, and two of the respondents are administrators of Rhetoric and Composition graduate programs that also host first-year writing.

Findings



## Findings: Method of Analysis

For closed-ended questions, I used descriptive statistics to report on the data. For open-ended questions, recognizing that the coding process is always subjective (Umbach, 2005), I assigned multiple codes to each response and sorted the data in various ways to note prevalent themes and patterns. Because open-ended questions leave room for interpretation and respondents can often respond to the same question in different ways, the process of analysis was iterative as opposed to necessarily conclusive. Some numbers are relatively low when trends are reported because only a certain number of WPAs may have chosen to answer a certain aspect of a question. Yet, the issues that surfaced in this study can further discussions regarding how WPAs can implement sustainable and productive digital literacy practices in their programs. I invite you to **choose** your own adventure, below, exploring the survey data based on your interests.

I also invite you to explore more [details about my data analysis approach](#) and themes in the data, perhaps examining the screenshots alongside the findings.

### Choice 1

Implementations

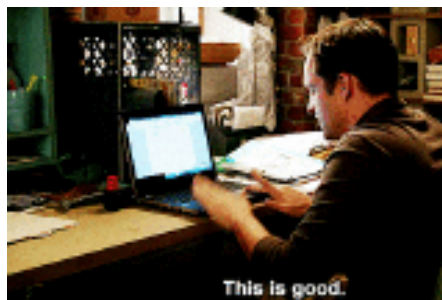


See if WPAs are integrating digital literacies programmatically.

### Choice 2

Motivations

Examine WPAs' motivations for or against implementing digital literacies.



### Choice 3

Multiliteracies



See in what ways the discourses & practices of WPAs reflect Selber's multiliteracies.

via GIPHY



## Implementations, Requirements & Challenges

The survey was designed to learn if and how digital literacy is being implemented programmatically and to discover WPAs' motivations for or against doing so. A majority of the survey respondents, **64%**, indicated that **digital literacy is formally encouraged in their programs** (n=67).

The respondents also indicated that digital literacy is at least moderately important to the *overall* mission of these writing programs. As shown in Figure 1, respondents were asked to select how important digital literacy is to the overall mission of their program using a scale from 1-11, with 1 representing unimportant and 11 indicating very important. While there was a range in level of importance, only 19 respondents (27%) chose any number below moderately important. The highest number of respondents (20%) chose 8—in between moderately and very important—and the **average rating** came out to **6.75%**, **just above moderately important**.

Thus, digital literacy is being employed in many programs and maintains a significant level of importance in relationship to other curricular goals.

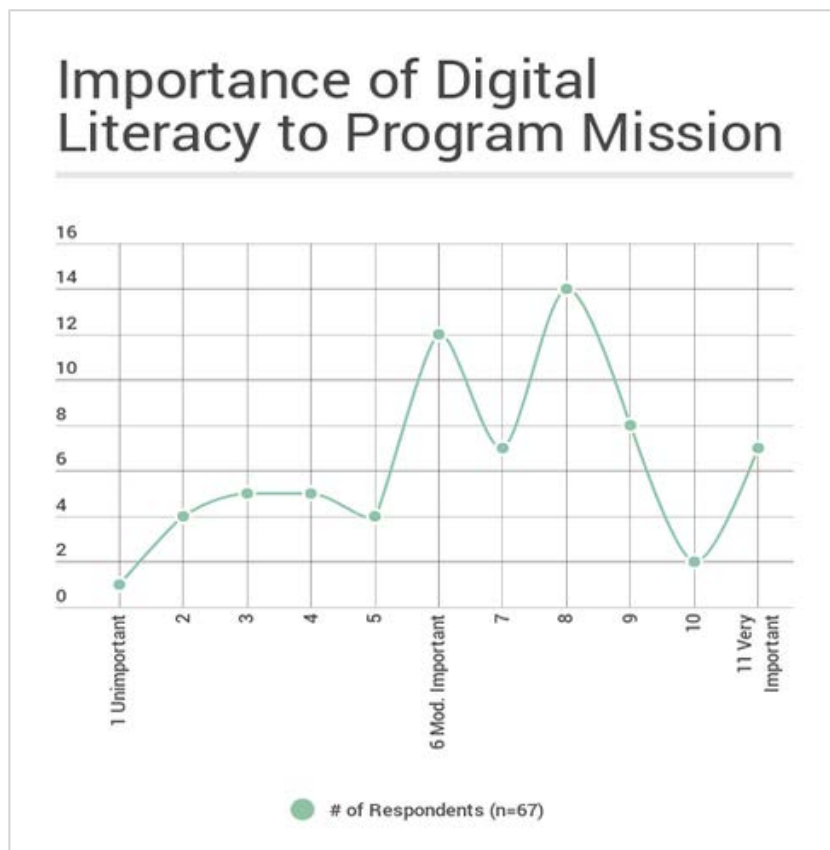


Figure 1

However, the ways in which it is being enacted and interpreted vary significantly across programs. Most often, WPAs support digital literacy by offering workshops or other teacher-training initiatives related to digital literacy (mentioned in 41% of the responses). The other most common programmatic instantiation of digital literacy (30%) is through Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) (or sometimes program objectives or goals) that articulate digital literacy requirements. Most often, these objectives and outcomes are related to research skills (for example, “students should be able to navigate online databases”).

Figure 2

To learn more about programmatic requirements, I asked respondents if their program requires instructors to assign a digital composing assignment (provided examples included a blog, wiki, audio essay) and if instructors are required to

teach students how to analyze digital texts. Overall, while digital literacy may be part of a program's SLOs, **the majority of the WPAs do not require that students analyze or produce digital compositions** (52.2% for producing, 44.9% for analyzing), although 26.1% and 29% of the WPAs stated that they suggest that instructors have students analyze or produce digital texts, respectively.

As Figure 2 shows, more WPAs indicated that their programs require students in at least some of their courses to analyze (29%) than to actually produce or compose a digital text (18.8%). As one respondent put it, she wanted to make "a distinction between pressing our students to be critical readers of digital media and asking our students to produce digital media. We emphasize the former, and to that extent, digital literacy is very important to our program. The latter, however, is not important to our program."

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In the webtext at <http://cconlinejournal.org/sheffield/>, Click the **buttons** toward the top of the chart above to **compare composing and analysis**. Hover over each item in the graph to see actual percentages.

While a composing requirement was not common, the most frequently mentioned type of assignment was a **"recast"** or **"remix"** assignment in which students would turn prior written research into a multimodal and/or digital composition.

When WPAs were asked to explain their answer to whether or not digital literacy is employed at a curricular level, some respondents indicated that they felt digital literacy belonged in upper-level special topics courses but not in first-year writing courses.

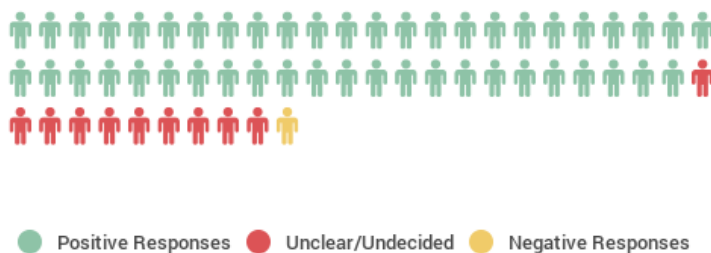
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## Motivations

Of course, a variety of factors and stakeholders' opinions play into the actual practices of a writing program. A WPA may feel a certain way about digital literacy but not be able to enact it in practice. To address potential disjunctures between motivations/attitudes and actual practices, I asked the open-ended question (survey section 3 question 4), "*What role should digital literacy play in the composition classroom?*" This allowed the WPAs to describe their own opinions, including being able to express that digital literacy should play no role in the composition classroom, even if WPAs have had to integrate it due to pressures from others.

Figure 3

## What role should digital literacy play in composition curricula?



infogr.am

Of the 58 responses to this question, **47 (81%) were coded as positive**, in the sense that these WPAs feel **digital literacy does belong in the composition curriculum**. Many used strong words such as “central,” “primary,” “essential,” “important,” and “integral” to describe the role of digital literacy. A few respondents explicitly noted that they wished digital literacy played a more significant role in their program. Only one respondent (1.7%) responded with what was coded as a negative response, and he indicated that digital literacy should play “no role” in the writing curriculum. (Unfortunately, the respondent did not explain further, so I was unable to determine the reason driving his response.) To learn more about the positive responses, visit the [motivations](#) page.

The remaining 10 responses were categorized as “undecided” or “unclear.” One respondent, for instance, said digital literacy’s role should depend on the goals of the program but did not explain further. Others in this category indicated that they were undecided, citing concerns about fitting digital literacy into an already-packed curriculum or that a focus on digital literacy could “**water down**” the **primary mission of “reading and writing academic prose.”**

The overwhelmingly positive response here (81%), read against the data above, indicates that most WPAs find digital literacy to be important, but slightly less of them have made the move to implementing this on a programmatic scale. The most commonly cited **challenges** to programmatic requirements were as follows:

1. There is a need for more teacher technology training, and there is not enough time for this training.
2. Faculty members lack interest.
3. Programs do not have enough (or any) classrooms with computer access.

These challenges are not exactly new in the composition scholarship, but what is perhaps new is discovering that WPAs working across a variety of programs, with varied resources and budgets, still face challenges, such as access, that the field has been trying to tackle for some time, indicating that we may need to continue exploring ways to manage these issues. To learn more about how I analyzed this data, visit the [data analysis](#) page.



## Motivations & Attitudes

### *What role should digital literacy play in the composition classroom?*

While I touch on WPAs' motivations on the [implementations](#) page to show the disjuncture between WPAs' beliefs and actual practices, here, I go into more depth about WPAs' motivations, based on their responses to the above open-ended question (in red). Of the 47 positive responses to this question, the most common motivation or justification for why digital literacy belongs in our composition courses was based on the notion that digital literacy is communication today. Six of the respondents stated that digital literacy is becoming literacy itself, and these statements tended to suggest that because **digital literacy "is literacy,"** it therefore fits into the traditional goals of the writing classroom and should be taught in the service of "improving traditional written communication." Another five respondents stated that we should **start from where students are**, which means teaching with and through digital media because it's "what students do."

Others phrased their motivations more in terms of how digital literacy can help students gain knowledge, skills, and abilities. The most common trends in the responses included **research skills, audience awareness, and personal and professional growth.** Regarding audience, the respondents in my study emphasized that digital literacy helps students think about how to appeal to various audiences "according to the way audiences read and retrieve information." Many respondents mentioned research skills, stating that writing programs are responsible for teaching students research skills in online environments because these environments are used most commonly by our students. They argued that digital literacy should be used as part of how the research process is approached. Only one respondent, however, specifically addressed the concern of evaluating the credibility of online sources. Instead, digital literacy tended to be described in terms learning the tools necessary for researching, such as library databases. Lastly, some respondents argued that digital literacy is needed in order to help students succeed in their personal and professional lives in college and beyond. These respondents indicated that digital literacy is a skill needed for "social communication" and "business practices."



On the other hand, in some responses, the role of digital literacy in writing courses was discussed not so much based on *why* it is important, but instead on *how* important it should be within the overall curriculum. Of the WPAs who responded in this way (13), nine (or 69%) stressed that digital literacy is important, but less important than the "basic" reading and writing skills that should be the focus in writing courses. These WPAs stated that digital literacy or technology should not be course topics or that digital technologies should be used

only insofar as they aid alphabetic literacies. The other four did not express worry that digital literacy would eclipse reading and writing skills, but they suggested that digital composing should be seen as one of several writing modes or genres. Thus, opinions were mixed when it came to how important digital literacy should be to the curriculum, but the majority indicated that it should hold **less importance than alphabetic literacies**, as opposed to being potentially complementary.

As discussed, there was only one negative response to this question that was intended to get at WPAs' motivations and attitudes toward digital literacies, and the respondent (who said digital literacy had no role in composition) did not offer enough context to shed light on reasons against implementing it. However, a few of the responses throughout the rest of the survey (especially respondents who answered "no" to the question: is digital literacy formally encouraged in your program?) alluded to **concerns about fitting digital literacy in to a busy curriculum** or that it could, as mentioned, **shift focus away from written, academic prose**.







## Multiliteracies

The survey was also designed to measure if a multiliteracies approach to digital literacy is being employed at the level of program administration. My purpose for considering this was to determine if programs are embracing the multi-faceted nature of digital literacy or if programmatic commitments are biased towards a particular approach. In other words, looking for biases towards one or more multiliteracies approaches in programs' instantiations could reveal ways to better approach technology integration or to broaden understandings of the potentials for digital literacy in composition curricula.

These concerns were measured in [survey](#) question 8, which asked respondents to examine definitions of rhetorical, critical, ethical, and functional digital literacies (summarized from Coley and Selber's texts) and to indicate **if they agreed that their program has a responsibility for teaching these literacies**. The categories were defined as follows (but not categorized as rhetorical, ethical, and so forth in the survey):

**Functional:** It is the responsibility of my writing program to teach students how to use digital technologies in order to achieve educational goals, to effectively manage online workspaces, and use advanced software, web-based programs, and/or apps.

**Critical:** It is the responsibility of my writing program to teach students to become informed questioners of digital technologies, to question the political and social assumptions of these technologies, and to question the ideologies that shape technology.

**Rhetorical:** It is the responsibility of my writing program to teach students how to produce in digital environments, which includes understanding and learning how to capitalize on the persuasive abilities of design and to reflect on their design choices.

**Ethical:** It is the responsibility of my writing program to teach students to be aware of the values of the

audiences for their electronic compositions, to teach them to respect others' work and ideas in electronic environments, and to cite them correctly.

Click the buttons toward the top of the chart above to see how the multiliteracies ranked, Hover over individual semi-circles to see percentages.

Over 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their writing program should teach students the ethical components of digital literacy, and 70% aligned with the critical. A majority (59.42%) also indicated their programs are responsible for the rhetorical component of digital literacy. On the other hand, less than half of the WPAs indicated that it is their program's responsibility to teach students the functional aspects of computer literacy, such as learning how to use certain apps and programs.

I also took specific student outcomes from the *WPA Outcomes Statement (version 2.0)* and *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* and asked the respondents to rank these outcomes based on the level of importance to their program's mission and goals (survey section 3 question 5). The goal here was to force a hierarchy of principles and practices with regard to functional, critical, rhetorical, and ethical literacies.



>85%  
Ethical



70%  
Critical



59%  
Rhetorical



<50%  
Functional

To design the question, I consulted the *Outcomes Statement and Framework* to examine the student outcomes delineated as important by these WPA-driven documents. I used two outcomes that aligned with each literacy—functional, critical, rhetorical, and ethical—and asked respondents to rank these from least to most important (1-8), choosing each number only once. (While the categories are listed in the table below, you can also [click here](#) to see a more in-depth explanation of how the categories were created.)

The categories that received the “most important” ranking most often were **D** (22.58%) and **F** (20.97%), with **B** close behind (16.92%) (n=69). No respondents selected H as most important, and for least important, again, H stood out, with 51.56% of respondents ranking it as least important. **C** was also ranked low in importance.

These data suggested that the rhetorical skill of learning to use technology strategically with a clear purpose that enhances the writing for a given audience was the student outcome most important to the overall goals and missions of these

	Outcome	Multiliteracy
A	Students should learn to use and cite information from electronic sources responsibly in their own documents.	Ethical
B	Students should learn how to evaluate the credibility of online sources.	Ethical
C	Students should analyze electronic texts to determine how technologies affect reading and writing processes.	Critical
D	Students should learn to use technology strategically with a clear purpose that enhances the writing for a given audience.	Rhetorical
E	Students should analyze where print and electronic texts are used, examining why and how people have chosen to compose using different technologies.	Critical
F	Students should use electronic environments to compose, revise, and edit texts.	Functional
G	Students should understand and exploit the differences in rhetorical strategies and affordances of electronic composing processes.	Rhetorical
H	Students should learn how to disseminate texts in electronic forms.	Functional

respondents' programs. This aligned well with the earlier finding that WPAs are motivated to implement digital literacy in order to serve rhetorical

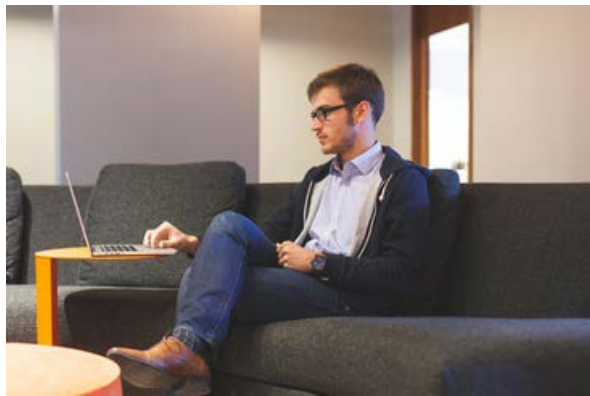
ends and enhance written communication. Also important was a functional skill—using electronic environments to compose, revise, and edit texts (F). However, the other functional skill of disseminating texts in electronic forms was not important. This makes sense since the first functional skill focuses more on the writing process, which was important to WPAs in other parts of the survey, whereas the second is a technical skill to circulate writing. Also important was the ethical ability of evaluating the credibility of online sources. This is consistent with the high ranking of ethical digital literacy in question 8. With the critical category, programs value teaching students to analyze where print and electronic texts are used and examine why and how people have chosen to compose using different technologies, more than teaching students to examine how electronic texts affect reading and writing processes. Other than functional ranking low, there weren't clear distinctions between rhetorical, critical, and ethical.

While the goal was to force priorities with this question, the findings may be limited when interpreted on their own because, as some respondents suggested, some categories overlap or may carry similar levels of importance. I therefore included an open-ended follow-up question that would shed additional light on the trends delineated in the quantitative data, asking WPAs to **describe their process** in ranking these outcomes.

Most respondents' explanations for their ranking focused on choosing the **outcomes that were most similar to traditional writing pedagogy goals**—or outcomes common for alphabetic texts. As one respondent stated, "I put as most important the tasks that are specific to general literacy skills (analyze texts and their technologies so as to use them in their papers effectively and responsibly)." A similar response was: "I selected as most important the choices that help students achieve in traditional writing contexts—research and analysis." Others indicated that questions focusing specifically on the technology were ranked lower because thinking about "genre" and "audience" is important for all students and should transcend medium. Thus, the theme of digital literacy being a means to achieving the traditional goals of writing courses and a means to rhetorical ends carried through these responses.

Many stated they were **less concerned with production or dissemination** than with the other categories. Also, similar to the [implementation](#) findings, respondents indicated that practice in critically reading and analyzing electronic texts is more important than creating them. However, this was generally not because they

did not value composing but because of time constraints and/or faculty expertise.



Research also carried heavy weight in this question. Over 60% of the respondents described research as important to their ranking process, stating their program cares about students being able to use online sources. A few respondents stated that students need to use sources ethically, and one stated programs should be sure “students know how to cite so that they don’t end up inadvertently being charged with academic dishonesty.” While evaluating the credibility of online sources was ranked highly in the quantitative data, most respondents took a more functional approach in the open-ended answers, describing **computers as research tools**.

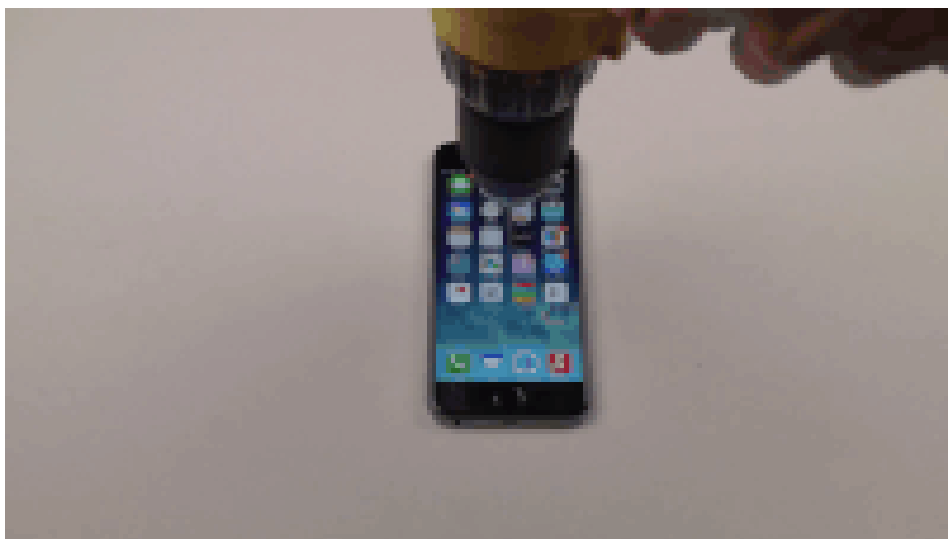
While the quantitative data showed that critical digital literacy is valued over rhetorical, the open-ended answers revealed that WPAs tend to interpret technologies as the electronic texts students analyze in a course, such as a YouTube video, as opposed to computers or programs used to create these texts. Only two respondents mentioned in an open-ended response—throughout the *entire* survey—that students are encouraged to question the technologies they (or others) use to compose. Selber (2004) maintained that students should be encouraged to ask what cultural and/or political values are embedded in technologies so they can become social critics as opposed to “indoctrinated consumers of material culture” (Selber, 2004, p. 95), and I would argue based on the survey responses that these kinds of questions are not typically being asked in the writing programs surveyed for this study. Similarly, some respondents noted technology is often invisible in their own programs, and others indicated that **analyzing how technologies affect reading and writing processes was not as important** as other literacies.





## Implications & Possibilities for Program Administration

Discussing their revisions of the *WPA Outcomes Statement* to embrace the field's broadening view of composing, Dylan Dryer et al. (2014) stressed the importance of basing “programmatic decisions on disciplinary knowledge” (p. 139). A growing body of research in the discipline suggests that asking students to compose in multiple modalities will make them more likely to be “rhetorically appropriate for any given audience” (Murray, 2009); their ability to think critically about the organization and purpose of print writing may improve (Takayoshi and Selfe, 2007); and they will be more likely to communicate effectively within future workplace and academic contexts, which are increasingly electronically mediated (Takayoshi and Selfe, 2007). As [discussed](#), researchers and teachers are also continually adopting Selber's multiliteracies, to reflect that the use of digital technologies in the composition classroom is multi-faceted, involving critical analysis, reflection, and action. If WPAs are to base programmatic decisions on disciplinary knowledge, as Dryer et al. suggest, it is important to consider how one's practices are lining up with disciplinary knowledge. As I examine how practices do or do not match what the field currently values, I have divided the primary implications of this study's findings into two sections, which I invite you to explore in either order, based on your own interests or questions. While the survey data show that many WPAs are forward-thinking and taking approaches to digital literacies that reflect the multiliteracies, the study also revealed some areas for further consideration, which is what the sections below focus on. ([Click on the teal headings below](#) to visit the appropriate section.)



via GIPHY

### Tech as Tool

This section of my analysis focuses on how certain programmatic instantiations reflect functional approaches to technologies, and I share ways to implement a more critical approach to digital literacy at the level of the writing program. This section also includes a sample critical technology analysis assignment sheet that any instructors who implement multimodal or digital literacies may find useful to adapt.

### New Literacies

This section of my analysis



discusses ways in which WPAs may need to move beyond alphabetic outcomes as they integrate digital composing in their programs. This section is relevant for instructors interested in new literacies, as well as administrators.



via GIPHY

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I also offer here a brief **summary of some of the survey's primary findings**—especially useful for readers who have chosen to begin reading at this section. To make the synthesis easy to follow, I have grouped key findings under the initial research questions.

- **Are WPAs pursuing digital literacy programmatically, and how is it being instantiated across programs?**
  - Many WPAs are pursuing digital literacies as at least moderately important to their program's overall goals and missions, and these instantiations are most common at the level of teacher training, workshops, and student learning outcomes; however, most have not yet moved to specific assignments that require digital literacies.
    - Those who have assignment requirements ask students to analyze more often than to compose. While not many WPAs require a digital composition, the most common genre mentioned was a "recast" or "remix" assignment in which students are asked to translate prior written research into a multimodal and/or digital composition.
- **What are the motivations underlying programmatic implementations of digital literacy in writing programs, and how are WPAs interpreting and representing digital literacy? To that end, what are the dominant discourses of technology underlying these representations?**
  - The WPAs in this study seem to primarily be motivated by a sense that digital literacy can improve alphabetic literacies. They also tend to characterize digital literacy as primarily important in relationship to research skills, which can be seen as a somewhat narrow approach to the concept or perhaps a conflation with information literacy.
  - Despite a lot of careful and critical approaches to digital literacy that are clearly evident in these programs, the discourse of technology as a neutral tool for mastery still pervades some WPAs' representations of digital literacy as it relates to the composition classroom.
- **Are writing programs aligning with rhetorical, functional, critical, or ethical (multiliteracies) approaches to digital literacy, and how are these approaches manifested in programmatic discourses and practices?**
  - An overwhelming majority (over 85%) of WPAs believe ethical digital literacy is the responsibility of their programs, and 70% also believe critical digital literacy is the responsibility of their program. These percentages are higher than the number of WPAs who indicated that they

programmatically encourage digital literacy (64%).

- Fifty-nine percent of respondents indicated their programs believe their programs should be responsible for the rhetorical component of digital literacy. Less than half of the WPAs indicated that it is their program's responsibility to teach students the functional aspects of computer literacy.
- For more on how these approaches are manifested, check out the [Multiliteracies](#) page.
- **How can WPAs support sustainable approaches to digital literacy in their programs?**
  - Explore the sections ([Tech as Tool](#) and [New Literacies](#) ) to learn more about what WPAs can do to support sustainable approaches.



## THINKING BEYOND TOOLS: WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION & DIGITAL LITERACIES

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## MULTIMEDIA

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