

Kristina ByBee & Mandy Luszeck

## Creating Opportunities for Digital Writing: Multimodality in Argument Writing Tasks

**Kristina ByBee** is an English Education PhD student at Arizona State University.

**Mandy Luszeck** is an Assistant Professor of English Education at Utah Valley University. Mandy primarily teaches English methods courses, freshman composition, and young adult literature.

### Introduction

*"I'm not a writer."*

*"I can't find anything to write about."*

*"I'm done with my draft. Now what?"*

We've all heard the sighs of resignation from our students when introducing the next writing assignment. Throughout our years teaching in secondary and first-year college composition classrooms, Mandy and I are quite familiar with students who are ready to give up before beginning to write anything. When we both were in a doctoral program and teaching first-year composition courses at a local community college, we thought about ways to create more interest in argumentative writing tasks by including multimodal elements and digital technologies.

Traditional modes of composing essays using pencil and paper or word processing continue to have their place in our classrooms. However, introducing students to methods for including multimodal elements in their compositions is beneficial in many ways. For Gen Z students who have grown accustomed to out-of-school digital texts that combine words with moving and still images, sound, and interactive elements, composing with multimodal elements in the classroom can encourage literacy engagement while drawing on students' expertise with digital technology.

Further, practicing reading and writing digital texts, especially argumentative texts, in the English classroom builds skills transferable to

other disciplines, the workplace, and civic discourse (Turner & Hicks, 2017).

As classroom teachers, the impact multimodal literacies have on the teaching of literacy in our classrooms is directly connected to the "social, pedagogical, and semiotic" (Bezemer & Kress, 2008. p. 166). Incorporating multimodality in English Language Arts (ELA) and first-year composition (FYC) courses can contribute to student growth in expression and communication, two skills necessary across academic disciplines, civic life, and the workplace. Additionally, the abundant access to the Internet and technology challenges the traditional view of literacy (Coiro et al., 2015).

Writing students need opportunities in their language arts classrooms to develop the global skills paramount in today's digital world. Students should be prepared to communicate in traditional forms and through multiple literacies as well. Further, building multimodality into research writing tasks can be an effective way to generate student engagement with nonfiction texts that are commonplace in ELA and FYC classrooms today.

*"I'm not a writer."*

### Defining Multimodality and Digital Literacy

We often take digital communication for granted. Texts, emails, and virtual meetings are part of our everyday lives. Even though we may be adept with such technology now, we spent months or perhaps years building our skills with these digital platforms. Likewise, our students have developed skills in various forms of digital communication. Most importantly, they have a

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built-in interest in exercising their skills in their out-of-school and in-school literacies. As we were creating or adapting several writing units for our first-year composition students, we were guided by multimodal literacy research and by best practices available in teaching texts.

Multimodal literacy can include how teachers deliver material to students, the kinds of texts with which students transact, as well as the multiple modes that student output might incorporate. As Bezemer and Kress (2008) explained: “Frequently, writing is now no longer the central mode of representation in learning materials—textbooks, Web-based resources, teacher-produced materials. Still (as well as moving) images are increasingly prominent as carriers of meaning.” Technology and multimodal meaning making are now ubiquitous parts of our lives.

Texts in today’s classrooms can take many forms: e-books, shared documents, emails, visual notetaking, videos, podcasts, book trailers, websites, and blogging; all fall under the “multimodal” umbrella. According to Serafini (2014), these multimodal texts are part of a “system of visual and verbal entities created within or across various cultures to represent and express meaning” (p. 12). With digital writing, students can limit or expand the reach of their compositions by considering purpose, audience, and mode.

Two texts we relied on (and continue to use to this day) as we created literacy units that included more reading and writing of digital texts were Turner and Hicks’ *Argument in the Real World: Teaching Adolescents to Read and Write Digital Texts* (2017) and Fletcher’s *Teaching Arguments: Rhetorical Comprehension, Critique, and Response* (2015). Both texts provide explanations of rhetorical concepts and activities for teaching argumentation in secondary classrooms, and we found the examples and activities useful for FYC with minor modifications.

We also recommend NCTE’s Position Statement, “Beliefs for Integrating Technology into the English Language Arts Classroom” (2018). The position statement’s four beliefs are organized in sections to provide K-12 teachers, teacher educators, and ELA researchers with relevant guidelines and advice for the challenges of an increasingly technological-dependent

society. Here are the four beliefs from the statement:

1. Literacy means *literacies*.
2. Consider literacies before technologies.
3. Technologies provide new ways to consume and produce texts.
4. Technologies and their associated literacies are not neutral.

When teachers promote choice in multimodal elements for digital writing, students are more motivated to exceed expectations. Students are able to practice autonomy and take ownership of their projects, gaining confidence in reading and creating multimodal texts.

As students conduct research using school library databases or on the Internet, they read, view, and listen to multimedia and make decisions about that piece of multimedia (Turner & Hicks, 2017). We can teach students to ask themselves critical questions during the research process. Questions might include: how does this image, video clip, or graphic support my composition? Is the source credible and relevant? Through a multimodal research project, students learn to interpret digital literacies, communicate, and express original ideas through these formats. We will share a sample writing unit that could be taught in secondary ELA or first-year composition courses.

### Sample Unit: The Difference-Makers Profile

We designed the Difference-makers unit to incorporate common ELA and FYC outcomes in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In the Difference-makers unit, students compose an argumentative profile of one person, place/event, or thing that makes (or has made) a positive difference in our world. Writing a profile is a common writing task in secondary ELA and FYC and can be assigned to include primary and secondary research.

When we introduce the unit to our students, we emphasize the importance of choosing a topic that is relevant but also interesting and out-of-the-ordinary. We encourage students who want to research a person to choose someone from their own generation; in our instructions, we set a condition that the person must have lived within the past 100 years.

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Unlike some profile tasks, we don't require students to conduct primary research such as an interview (a task that may prove impossible for many of their topic choices). Instead, we emphasize selecting credible and relevant source material. Since the task is to craft an argument for *why* the person, place/event, or thing they have chosen has made a positive impact in the world, we remind students *to inform* as well as *to persuade* their audience with their writing (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1.**  
Goals of Writing Unit

- Students have **freedom to choose** a person, place/event, or thing to research (with some teacher conditions).
- Students conduct **academic research** using school library databases and school-filtered internet searches.
- Students practice authentic **writing tasks**.

*"I can't find anything to write about."*

### Choosing a Topic and Conducting Research

Teaching students the importance of the discovery stages of the writing process, such as brainstorming and researching, helps them develop skills needed in ELA and other disciplines. For the Difference-makers unit, we begin by reading the instructions aloud in class, explaining requirements and expectations, and inviting questions. To introduce the multimodal element of the project early and model student product format based on our own instruction of the project, we also introduce digital examples. These include displays of possible "difference-makers" in the form of TED Talks and other notable speeches.

Some multimedia examples include an address by Emma Watson delivered to the United

Nations on the HeforShe Campaign (United Nations, 2014) and a speech by Blake Lively on the Child Rescue Coalition mission (Variety, 2017). As a class, we discuss these individuals' merits as a "difference-maker" and what arguments could be made for them. Next, we provide topic restrictions and share previous project examples before assigning the brainstorming worksheet (see Figure 2 below).

Who or what topics do students choose for this project? Each year, we are amazed by the creativity and careful thought students put into their topic choices! In the past few semesters, our students have written profiles on varied topics, including:

- People: Chance the Rapper, Adam Driver, Tarana Burke, Cesar Chavez, and Melati and Isabel Wijisen of Bali
- Places/events: The U.S. National Park system; Petra, Jordan; the 1985 Live Aid concert
- Things: Manny Pacquiao Foundation; *Jeopardy!*; Khan Academy

### Drafting and Revising

When students have chosen their topics, the next step is to find credible research about their topic. They begin by performing basic searches for the topics on the school library databases, Google Scholar, and school-filtered Internet. Typically, we require a minimum of three sources for this project, including any Internet sources. It is not uncommon for students to find reliable Internet sources since many individuals, foundations, and non-governmental organizations maintain websites that are freely accessible to the public. Articles from news organizations, including video clips, can also be found online. We provide our students time in class to conduct research and create a "working draft" works cited page.

After reading and taking notes on their research material, students are ready to begin their profile drafts. Since this is an argumentative profile, We share an informal argument structure based on the Toulmin Argument Model with students that they can utilize for composing their drafts (Nesbitt, 1994-2022) (Refer to Figure 3 below).

**Figure 2.**

Difference-Makers Brainstorm Worksheet

**Brainstorming: The Difference-Makers**

1. Instructions: Brainstorming is a critical part of the writing process. You will begin your project by making a list of persons, places, and things that are important to you and fulfill the requirements of the assignment.

| <p><b>Persons</b><br/>Examples: environmentalists, teachers, writers, poets, artists, scientists, world leaders, religious leaders, journalists, scholars, doctors, lawyers, and architects</p> | <p><b>Places/events</b><br/>Examples: UNESCO World Heritage sites, historical sites, historical architecture, natural landmarks, museums, universities, archeological sites.</p> | <p><b>Things</b><br/>Examples: foundations, charities, non-governmental organizations, businesses, learning institutions, faith-based organizations</p> |
|---|--|---|
|   |  |   |

2. Next, **circle your top three choices from the chart above** and list the pros and cons of researching each choice. Based on your pro/con assessment, you will now decide on one topic for your Difference-makers Profile.

|             | Choice #1: | Choice #2: | Choice #3: |
|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Pros</b> |            |            |            |
| <b>Cons</b> |            |            |            |

3. **My Difference-maker profile topic:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 3**  
*Argument Outlines Based on Toulmin Model*

*Argumentative Profile Structure:*

Introduction:

- Attention-getter
- Explain attention-getter
- Background of topic; WHY are you interested in the topic? WHO is your audience?
- Your claim

*Example Claims:*

*Claim Example 1:* Malala Yousafzai, a survivor of a Taliban assassination attempt, an advocate for girls education, and a 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner, is an icon for many young women worldwide.

*Claim Example 2:* Doctors Without Borders, a nonprofit organization that brings vital medical services to people in conflict zones and epidemic areas around the world, is an example of how healthcare workers can serve selflessly and impact the world positively.

**Section 1 (evidence & warrant):** Reason #1 that your claim is valid; supported with research

**Section 2 (evidence & warrant):** Reason #2 that your claim is valid; supported with research

**Section 3 (evidence & warrant):** Reason #3 that your claim is valid; supported with research

**Anticipate Question(s)/Objection(s) and Rebuttal:** What are some reasons that readers might reject your claim? Is the person, place, or thing that you are profiling controversial in some way(s)? Explain. How will you counter the questions and objections?

**Conclusion:** Restatement (in a new way) of your claim. Call to action.

The structure detailed above can be adapted to meet the needs of your students. We encourage our students to write as many paragraphs as needed to persuade and inform their audience. We also recommend including multimodal elements (images, graphics, video clips) within the draft.

To get students started with their drafts, we give them a list of templates from the text *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Graff & Birkenstein, 2021). In the “Why your claim matters” section, you can select several templates that work as starter sentences for this project. We put the template sentences on a slide on the projector screen and tell students that they can adapt the sentences to fit their needs by changing the words. The template sentence becomes the first sentence in a free write session about their topic. Students continue with the writing process through drafting, peer feedback, revising, and proofreading.

***“I’m done with my draft. Now what?”***  
**From the (Digital) Page to the Screen:**  
**Publishing**

Drawing from Tom Romano (1991), the final steps in the Difference-makers unit includes having the students create a multimodal, multimedia research project. After completing research and creating a drafted argument on their difference-maker, students begin working on a final product that looks quite different from a standard written essay. In order to incorporate the multimodal theme of the unit, students are asked to create a multimedia final product. Students are told that they must communicate their argument through a different medium. Options suggested include:

- Prezi
- Podcast
- Movie
- Adobe Spark presentation
- Google Slides presentation
- Website
- Magazine Article (digital or print)

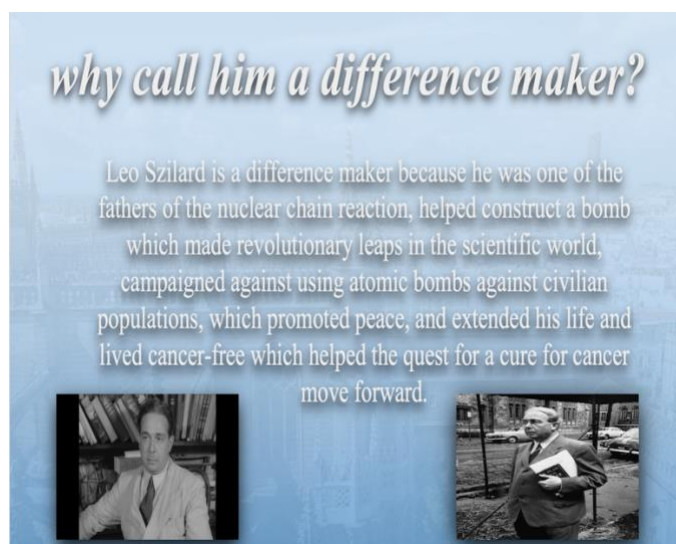
Students may also propose a different medium not suggested. Students understand that the medium they choose determines their audience and the tone of their piece. However, whatever option they choose should include the following:

- A brief background of the difference-maker
- 3-4 distinct points arguing for this "difference-maker" using outside sources/research
- Works Cited

For this assignment, students are asked to take the written information they have drafted and transmediate it to a new medium to convey their argument. This additional composing work requires students to consider the critical audiences, nuances, tones, and purposes of diverse mediums.

Students present these multimedia projects to their peers at the conclusion of the project and turn these in as their final products. One example of a student product can be seen below in Figure 4. This student chose to create their difference-maker argument on Leo Szilard--a nuclear physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project but campaigned against its use in Japan on civilian populations—in a PowerPoint format.

**Figure 4**  
Difference Maker Student Sample



*Note.* This image is a student-produced slide from a Difference-Maker project on Leo Szilard.

## Conclusion

Global trends are changing how communication is created, delivered, and received, which means that our work as ELA instructors must also transform (Vasudevan, 2010). It is not enough for students to learn to read and compose text in traditional written formats. Today's students must also learn to interpret and infer meaning from literacies delivered in multiple modalities across different media. Likewise, they must be equipped to communicate and represent ideas using multiple modalities as well. Assigning students writing assignments that incorporate these multiple literacies helps prepare them to discern and deliver information in the digital world in which they live.

Specifically, a multimodal composition unit in an ELA or FYC course helps students to understand how literacies beyond spoken and written language work, explore the more complete meaning potential of multimodal texts, and expands students' access to resources for making thinking visible. Lastly, assigning students to utilize multimodal and multimedia sources as well as create them validates the kinds of literacy that students are already frequently engaged in during their day-to-day lives. This creates heightened investment in the classroom learning objectives which translates to increased student performance.

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Kristina ByBee is an English Education PhD candidate at Arizona State University. *To contact, please email [kristina.bybee@asu.edu](mailto:kristina.bybee@asu.edu).*

Mandy Luszeck is an Assistant Professor of English Education at Utah Valley University. *To contact, please email [mandy.luszeck@uvu.edu](mailto:mandy.luszeck@uvu.edu).*

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