Constructing Meaning Through Textual And Visual Elements In The First-Year Composition Classroom

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CONSTRUCTING MEANING THROUGH TEXTUAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS IN THE
FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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CONSTRUCTING MEANING THROUGH TEXTUAL AND VISUAL ELEMENTS IN THE FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of The University of Texas at El Paso in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Introduction

As an avid comic book reader, I am more than familiar with the practice of making meaning out of text, image, and text and image working together. Something that’s always struck me as a comic book fan is the balance maintained between both the artwork and the writing. In ideal cases, cases where artwork and text are working harmoniously at generating meaning, neither element truly overpowers the other, allowing for that meaning to develop for the reader in a unique way. In Understanding Comics: The Visual Art, Scott McCloud (1993) describes the process of meaning making in comics as a collaborative process between creator and reader, “The phenomenon of observing the parts but seeing the whole...closure” (63). Once engaged with the comic’s visual and textual elements established by the creator(s), the reader can then make meaning with them through interpretation, close-reading, and mental participation. Comic books have also inspired my interest in the field of visual rhetoric and what exactly the “image” can do regarding generating new opportunities for meaning making. Comics are the medium for which I recognized how much a single image, free of text, can still have something profound to say or capture something that words could not.

As a graduate student studying rhetoric and writing studies and as a teaching assistant at the University of Texas at El Paso, I am curious about how the meaning-making practices of comics could be incorporated into the First-Year Composition classroom as a method of learning for students. I am in the ideal position to explore this area of interest, as I have experience with both literacy and rhetoric studies and am currently teaching two Rhetoric and Composition I courses. I find the FYC classroom the ideal environment to explore this area of inquiry, since it serves as an introduction to the concepts of writing at the university level. Students become more familiar with the definition and application of authorship, different genres of writing, the many
influences upon their writing, and critically thinking about the world around them. I want to be able to exemplify how these goals of FYC can be explored beyond the use of textual elements (traditional writing assignments), by incorporating projects that feature textual and visual elements working together to create a broader understanding of visual rhetoric, the student’s writing process, and challenge students’ thinking so that they think about visual interpretation when they approach new situations.

My interest in how multimedia elements can be used within the writing classroom has already had an influence on how I’ve taught the FYC courses. For example, I’ve paid careful attention to document and text design, incorporated relevant graphs, charts, and icons when presenting information as a part of lecturing, included emojis when addressing my class through online announcements, and have made use of two major assignments in the semester that rely heavily on balancing visual and textual elements (a multimodal profile and a visual presentation). These incorporations of visual elements have helped me explain assignments better, worked at keeping students engaged with my lectures, and provided my students with the opportunity to experiment with multimedia instead of the traditional essay format they’ve grown accustomed to. I include these details to convey my interest in making the FYC classroom more visually oriented, while also disclosing that I would like to push the innovation and incorporation of visual elements in the classroom even further than what I have already done.
Literature Review

While the distinction between visual and textual elements may seem obvious, I find it helpful to ascribe informed definitions to both terms before proceeding into the educational application of these elements working in tandem. Multiple literacy and writing studies scholars have put forth definitions for both textual and visual elements from the perspective of how they engage readers/viewers and convey information, uncovering both unique and overlapping characteristics. In an evaluation of English curricula, Kress (1999) provides the following definitions of the textual and visual, distinguishing that “Writing is oriented towards action and event, broadly; and the visual is oriented towards the display of elements and their relations. Information which displays what the world is like is carried by the image; information which orients the reader in relation to that information is carried by language.” (76). In a study of the logic that visual and textual elements behave under, specifically regarding scientific learning materials, Kress (2000) discerns that, “Image is founded on the logic of display in space; writing (and speech even more so) is founded on the logic of succession in time. Image is spatial and nonsequential; writing and speech are temporal and sequential” (339). These definitions address the rate at which either element can be absorbed by the reader/viewer. Kress also situates the reader/viewer in relation to the textual or visual elements, determining that text orients the reader in relation to the information they are perceiving, through the act of reading, while image demonstrates information without needing to orient the viewer, because the image is concrete in what it displays, through the act of seeing.

McCloud (1993) provides the following definitions for the visual and textual elements:

Pictures are received information, we need no formal education to “get the message”, the meaning is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information; it takes
time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols as language. When pictures are more abstracted from “reality”, they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures (49).

McCloud draws the distinction between textual and visual by how they are engaged with by the reader/viewer. While I don’t necessarily agree that all visual elements can be deciphered for meaning at an instantaneous rate, I do agree with how both visual and textual elements can borrow qualities and characteristics from one another, and in doing so, exchange engagement methods from the reader/viewer.

The visual design elements of text are elaborated upon in Andersen’s (2016) study of First Year Writing student engagement with an assignment prompt, wherein a written prompt was provided to students in two formats, first as a descriptive paragraph and second as a list outlining tasks; both prompt formats had contained the same written content. Andersen concluded that “...visual cues help students ‘see’ what they are supposed to do and thus aid students in completing assignment requirements” (17). Andersen’s study also found that when the students received the prompt formatted as a list (the more visually engaging variant of the two prompts), they had completed all outlined tasks of the assignment, whereas when they received the paragraph-formatted prompt, they neglected to address a few of the tasks being asked of them. Andersen’s results surrounding text taking on characteristics of the image exemplify the immediacy that visual information is absorbed by the viewer, that both Kress and McCloud clarified in their definitions of visual elements. Andersen complicates the results of her study in relation to the FYW curriculum by pointing out that while the more visually attuned design of the text helped students immediately identify key information regarding their tasks, she
questioned whether or not this may hinder a student’s skills in close reading and determining meaning for themselves.

Serving as a response to the anxieties expressed by Andersen regarding student’s close reading ability, it is also worth recognizing that visuals can take on characteristics of textual elements, such as elements of figurative language like abstraction and metaphor. These traditionally textual qualities can be recognized by students through methods similar to close reading and interpretation. Regarding the use of a visual metaphor, Horn (1998) states, “Visual language metaphor has the capacity to incorporate multiple meanings. The visual elements often provide the impact, emphasis, mood, or tonality that reinforces the main idea but that also triggers supporting or relevant ideas” (373). Horn’s definition of what the visual can accomplish align with McCloud’s definition of grasping the meaning behind the visual instantaneously or impactfully. Horn’s application of the visual’s textual characterization is exemplified through applications in learning materials, such as presentations where image and text can be used cooperatively. Horn suggests that a partnership between textual and visual elements allows for the two to serve as mutually beneficial, the visual enhancing the message of the text for the audience by taking on traditionally textual characteristics that are left for the audience to recognize. I agree with Horn’s assessment and find it to be a strong example of how images can lend themselves to enhancing close-reading/close-viewing skills for students.

Ehses (1989) explored how visual elements can adopt some of the characteristics of textual elements in a graphic design course, where students were tasked with recreating the literary/rhetorical devices (metaphor, personification, metonymy, hyperbole, etc.) present in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in a visual format. Ehses identified that, “Rhetorical figures do not by any means represent specific recipes. They are exploration tools that can spur lateral thinking,
giving designers the awareness of possibilities to make the best choice” (173), which is reminiscent of how rhetoric is used textually as well. Ehses’ study provides an example of how visuals can incorporate traditionally textual characteristics to similar effect, providing students with an understanding of those literary devices though a different medium, while also being able to practice how those literary devices behave through their own creations.

Compiling these definitions of visual and textual elements results in an understanding that both can be used effectively to convey and develop meaning. Both visual and textual elements can also borrow characteristics from one another to fulfill the goals established and decided upon by the creator, making both elements rhetorical. While textual and visual elements share similar responsibilities when attempting to achieve the same goal, it is also worth noting that they also have unique properties that cannot be replicated by one another. Visual elements by nature, are defined through how they’re seen, while text is defined by how it is read; both ingested by the viewer/reader differently, for example an image of a sunset and a textual description of one are inherently processed differently, despite being representations of the same natural occurrence. This understanding informs how visuals can be used in the writing classroom, recognizing that students do not engage with the world through a single sensual process, nor do they write or read while engaging with only one sensual process.

While the digital age of the 20th and 21st centuries has made the incorporation of textual and visual elements in the classroom much more accessible and applicable, there seems to be a reluctance to fully embrace visual elements as learning and composing materials. Hobbs (2002) notes that, despite academia’s strong adherence to textual output, learning has always been visual, stating “…language arts teachers have always incorporated visual theory of one kind or another in their teaching. Yet verbal-visual relationships keep transforming as technologies
change and our understanding of vision grows” (56). Hobbs, having examined the use of visuals and texts throughout history, recognized the visual’s prominence in historical learning materials, such as the efficacy at realizing and supporting arguments at rhetoric’s inception in ancient Greece, how the use of ecphrasis brought the visual through the textual in Renaissance poetry, and how, as technology has allowed, a gradual shift from written visual metaphor to visuals and straightforward text work together in tandem. Each of these historical examples exemplifies that visual elements have always been tied to textual learning.

Technology’s impact on the shifting roles between textual and visual elements as learning materials from a societal perspective are summarized by Kress (2015) through this example,

In newspapers, the pages of the 1960s are black and white, and covered in print; in the 1990s by contrast there is color, there are images; and in many contemporary newspapers in the “west” print has nearly been pushed off the page...The point is [rather] this; that after a period of some two-to-three hundred years of the dominance of writing as the means of communication and representation, there is now yet again, a deep shift taking place in this system, and in the valuation of elements in this system (69).

As new technology emerges (color printers, television broadcasting, the Internet, video productions) and access to it becomes more commonplace, the role of the visual as a medium of conveying information has become increasingly more prominent in modern society.

Examining the image as a rhetorical object capable of being scrutinized for rhetorical decisions and devices is one of the common applications of visual elements within the FYC classroom. The intent behind providing rhetorical analysis for the image is elaborated upon by Hill (2003), stating “Students need to learn to appreciate the power of images for defining and
for reinforcing our cultural values and to understand the ways in which images help us define our individual roles within society” (116). Hill’s sentiments connect with the understanding of the cultural shift from text to visual in our approach to learning and calls on the necessity of preparing students to navigate and assess a society that is becoming more reliant on visual forms of communication. While I recognize the benefit to students when given the opportunity to rhetorically analyze visual elements (advertisements, movies, photographs, etc.), it has been my experience that this is where the incorporation of visual elements in the FYC classroom usually ends. I would like to see a stronger incorporation of visuals in the FYC classroom, practices that make visuals a primary component of the composition process for students by having them move beyond acting as visual consumers into visual producers themselves.

Selfe (2004) pushes the incorporation of the visual/multimodal in the FYC classroom further by calling on instructors to incorporate visual literacy skills into their courses, having students not just understand and analyze visual elements, but “...to create, combine, and use visual elements (e.g., colors, forms, lines, images) and messages for the purpose of communication” (482). Selfe incorporates these practices into her own FYC course by having students complete visual essays, which are composed through a balance of textual and visual elements attempting to tell one narrative and visual arguments, where students create images based on rhetorical appeal. Selfe’s proposition extends from Hill’s analytical position, by providing students with an active role in not only engaging with visual elements but practicing and producing them themselves. Selfe concludes that, “...the goal set of these [visual] assignments is...to help students and ourselves better understand the communicative power and complexity of visual texts...” (487), which I agree with; the incorporation of visual elements in
the classroom provides for more well-rounded learning experiences that offer students a different way of interacting with and thinking about the world around them.

Frisica-Pawlowski and Monge (2020) question the intent behind exposing students to a variety of multimodal tools and experiences in preparation for an assignment, only to have them produce a submission that consists entirely of text, an experience I can relate to, having done much of the same as a student. As a student, I completed these assignments where there would be all this research which involved seeking out videos, looking over infographics, and reading through news articles and yet all of that was distilled into a strictly textual essay. The incorporation of visual elements in students’ work is echoed by Frisica-Pawlowski and Monge, stating “...by asking students to create and disseminate information through both textual and visual modes, we more effectively address the ways in which FYW speaks to knowledge practices embedded in the discipline and beyond” (para. 20). Frisica-Pawlowski and Monge suggest that ignoring visual elements as learning materials and assignment submissions is doing students a disservice, in consideration of the many multimodal elements they’re sure to encounter outside of the classroom. Furthermore, Frisica-Pawlowski and Monge, like Selfe, suggest that it is not enough to instruct students on how to rhetorically analyze a visual element, but that instruction on how to incorporate a visual based on rhetorical necessity is essential as well. By providing instruction on the assessment and creation of visual elements, students are better prepared to engage with a wider, more considerate, array of sources.

The considerate and mindful approach to composition is addressed by Shipka (2011) in relation to literacy in academic theory, as she states, “In addition to treating the various materials and supports people employ while producing texts, our theoretical frameworks must help us trace the multiple spaces in which and times at which composing occurs, and attend as well to
embodied activity and co-practice” (39). A significant acknowledgement Shipka makes within *Toward a Composition Made Whole* (2011), that I agree with, is that though there is a push for more of a presence of multimodal student learning and composing, this does not equate to the replacement or discouragement of the creation and implementation of textual academic essays. Shipka advocates that there is room for both textual and multimodal forms of learning and composing to coexist in the classroom, depending on the context and creator. This awareness is resonant with the understanding of texts and visuals as rhetorical entities, though with a consciousness for the student’s/creator’s choice and the rhetorical context. Shipka’s recognition of the visual’s place in the FYC classroom, much like Selfe’s, alters that student positionality, having the students serve as insiders by rhetorically assessing the situation/assignment and then designing a submission that they’ve determined best suits that situation’s goals, be it through textual or visual elements, or a combination of the two.

A focus on the composition process has proven to be another effective method of incorporating the visual (and more) into the FYC classroom, signifying a consciousness for a writer’s workspace and what that workspace and its components have to say about the composition’s construction. Shipka’s (2011) attention to composition process is out of a desire to, “...make the complex and highly distributed processes involved with the production, reception, circulation, and valuation of texts more visible” (38), which also aligns with the goals of an FYC course, by making students more conscious and mindful readers and writers. Rule (2018), similarly motivated by examining the composition process and the influence a writer’s surroundings may have on their written work, designed an assignment in her graduate student writing course which blended the study of composition processes with the incorporation of visual elements like photographs, drawings, and videos. After interviewing the students who
participated in the multimodal composition process project, Rule determined, “Multimodal methods illuminate the texture and detail of interactive moments that retrospective accounts cannot access and that exceed writers’ conscious awareness, giving writers a way to see their environmental processes strangely” (425). The “inaccessible elements” captured by the visuals used in Rule’s project connect with some of the definitions established by Kress and McCloud, providing an example of something the visual can provide that the textual cannot on its own. A focus on the composing process, and how to capture that process visually, is significant to an FYC course because it provides students with a method of thinking about themselves as writers from a perspective they may not have considered. This visually conscious learning process reveals what words may not be able to, by capturing elements of atmosphere and personal reflection, which makes it even more worth exploring with first-year writers as an alternative method of thinking/reflecting.

As a student and teacher, the ever-growing presence of visual elements in the writing process within the FYC classroom interests me greatly and fills me with a sense of inspiration and wonder of the many possibilities ahead. I feel as if, as a comic book fan, I’ve been aware of what’s possible when text and image are working collaboratively and yet I’ve only looked at that relationship critically from within that genre, without fully realizing how that relationship can, and does, present itself in the writing classroom.

I appreciate the definitions of visual and textual elements outlined by McCloud and Kress, as they’ve provided me with a strong introductory point for this project. By establishing loose definitions of what each element accomplishes independently regarding the creation of meaning, I hope to be able to clarify what they can also do together. Examining the way visual elements can exemplify textual characteristics and vice versa establishes that these two elements
are not wholly independent and can be utilized to achieve similar goals. Examining the history of the visual’s presence in the writing classroom establishes how these elements have worked cooperatively before and informs how they can continue to work collaboratively moving forward. Finally, I’ve been most intrigued and inspired by the creative uses of visual elements in the FYC classroom described by Shipka, Selfe, and Rule. Their scholarship greatly informs how I define composition and how I convey that understanding to my students. Their projects exemplify the unconventional, but nonetheless effective, methods of teaching composition that provide me with the inspiration to think creatively about how I go about teaching similar concepts. Lastly, I find the work of these scholars to be extremely beneficial in helping students recognize how to interpret and analyze visual information, in addition to expanding their understanding of rhetoric, composition, meaning making, and authorship. I aim to achieve a similar understanding in my own classroom with my own projects.

I am interested in how visual elements can continue to be used as learning materials that help students understand the concepts about writing that they would encounter in an FYC course. I believe that this would not only result in more lasting understandings of core concepts, but also prepare students for how to engage with visual elements and visual information outside of the classroom. I am also reminded again of the meanings I’ve made on my own while reading comics and I recall how impactful some of those meanings have been. I want to be able to replicate that process of meaning making in my classes for my students. I am committed to using visual elements in this way in my classes because I believe in how visual and textual elements can work together to create unique and enduring meanings.
Methodology

To supplement my literature review, I conducted my own teacher research within the two First-Year Composition courses I taught during the Spring 2022 semester. These were both sections of the first level FYC course, Rhetoric and Composition 1 (RWS 1301), at The University of Texas at El Paso. The first course had twenty-four students enrolled and the second course had twenty students, forty-four students in total between both classes. Demographically, UTEP is the second-largest university in the United States to have a majority Mexican American student population.

I chose teacher research as my methodology of inquiry since I was not only in the position to conduct such a study, but also interested in applying my research to the classroom and seeing how my students can develop their own understandings of themselves as authors and their individual composition processes by using a combination of textual and visual elements as learning materials in a major project. The research question I had developed was: *How do students make meaning out of textual and visual elements to understand authorship and composition?* and I planned on answering this question through my teacher research of student assignment submissions within the two RWS 1301 courses I taught.

While researching teacher research in relation to this project, I was taken by Ray’s (1993) understanding of the teacher/student dynamic, that “Students are not merely subjects whom the teacher-researcher instructs and assesses; they are co-researchers, sources of knowledge whose insights help focus and provide new directions for the study” (175-176). I found this mutually beneficial understanding of teacher research to align not only with the goals of my project, but with the goals of the RWS 1301 course in general. In my experience teaching RWS 1301, I’ve always encountered a sense of collaboration between myself and my students. We foster and
maintain an open, dialogic environment that results in what I believe to be worthwhile
discussions that expand understandings of course topics for all participants. I aimed to capture
that same sort of expanded understanding with my project since it provided both myself and my
students with the opportunity for a greater understanding of authorship, the composition process
within different settings, and the possible connections made between visual and textual elements.

The notion of a “shared inquiry” among teacher-researcher and student (Ray, 1993)
intrigued me and was something I hoped to capture with my project. Broadly, both my students
and I would be defining the concepts of authorship and composition by analyzing them through
visual and textual representations; one difference being scale, in that my students would work on
their one submission that makes these connections, while I’d be examining all my students’
submissions. Nickoson (2012) elaborates on the concept of shared inquiry, stating that as teacher
researchers, “…we can put ourselves in a position to effectively learn not only about our students
but also – and crucially – from them. We will be in the position to understand how they write and
why, how they learn and what their educational and literate goals are” (111, original italics).
Therefore, I chose teacher-research as the methodology for my project, since the practice
embodies what it’s like to be a graduate student in my position, where learning is both
couraged and shared between myself and my students.

I approached my thesis study from my various positions as a student, instructor, and El
Paso resident. I am a relatively new instructor, having only taught this one version of the course
(RWS 1301) several times at the one academic institution (UTEP). I am a native of El Paso and
had attended UTEP as an undergraduate student before pursuing my graduate education in
Rhetoric and Writing Studies. As a part of my graduate student experience, I was trained to teach
First-Year Composition. While working on this project I was faced with the challenge of
addressing my students’ work from the perspectives of an instructor and researcher. As an instructor I must acknowledge the power differential that prevents myself and my students from learning from one another in the same way, while as a researcher I wanted to still relate to my students and encourage their honest expressions in their work for the purposes of this project. As a student-instructor I was able to achieve a balance between these two perspectives, maintaining my authority while also being able to convey how I can relate to my students, since I was in their position as an undergraduate not too long ago. This project is also shaped by my personal and academic interests in visual rhetoric, visual storytelling, and FYC pedagogy, which influenced how I designed and analyzed this project.

Upon deciding I wanted to conduct teacher research in my classes, I began designing a new major assignment for the first learning module of the RWS 1301 curriculum, titled “Taking Inventory”, for my classes. I designed this assignment concurrently while working on the research for this thesis project. The assignment I designed was titled the “Multimodal Composition Process Newsletter” (Appendix A), which took direct inspiration from much of my research on textual and visual elements in the FYC classroom, most directly from Rule’s (2018) “Writing’s Rooms.” The goal with this assignment was to reinforce the objectives of the RWS 1301 curriculum in Module 1 and to expand upon how textual and visual elements can work together as learning materials in the FYC classroom by having students use them to make meaning out of their composition processes.

In the “Multimodal Composition Process Newsletter”, I instructed my students to reflect upon their writing processes for different writing samples they had completed previously in the course (two writing journals and the major assignment itself) and consider the possible effect their environments that they composed in may have had on their composition process. I
instructed my students to compose this assignment in the style of a newsletter, where they would be providing me with their personal insight into their composition processes. In the assignment, above each reflection paragraph, students were also required to include an excerpt of each writing sample they referred to and a visual representation (photograph or illustration) of the setting that the writing sample was composed in. I recognized that some students may not be comfortable sharing their exact environments, which is why I also offered students the option to include visual representations of their mental state. This would account for the metaphysical space they situated themselves in and served as a way of avoiding any discomfort while still fulfilling the assignment’s objectives. I also informed my students that the visual elements they included were completely up to them, meaning they could choose to include an image of just a part of their rooms or an object in the room as representational of that space.

I had my students reflect on the spaces where their writing was produced because, like Rule, I believed this presented them with an opportunity to consider their actions as authors and expand their understanding of composition. My intention with this assignment’s format was inspired by the way a reader would make meaning out of the visual and textual elements of a comic book, by mentally “filling in” the gutter space between panels and generating an understanding of the story; engaging with that process of closure described by McCloud. My students, similarly, would be filling in the gutter space for each entry of their assignment, by having their writing sample excerpts and their writing settings’ visual representations aligned side by side. They would then be making meaning between the two in the form of their reflection on their composing processes in those various environments.

This assignment borrows heavily from Rule’s “Writing’s Rooms” article, which detailed a similar assignment that she tasked her graduate students with completing, about generating an
awareness of their surroundings while writing. In her assignment, Rule tasked her students with reflecting on their composition practices in consideration of their environments with the inclusion of sketches, photographs, and videos. Rule concluded that, “I see writing’s rooms and these multimodal methods as especially useful for writers in our classrooms. And I raise them to argue for something ultimately quite simple: it is good for writers to see writing happen in its infinite variety, modes, and locations” (428, original italics). The opportunity to see writing is what stood out the most to me in reflection of Rule’s work and is something I hoped to capture with my undergraduate students as they engaged with a similar assignment. By incorporating visual elements into an assignment of this nature, students can see elements of their writing processes or of themselves as authors that a written reflection would not be able to capture on its own. Having students reflect on their composition processes and examine those processes visually also provides a greater opportunity to understand writing as “…social, expressive, cultural, political, affective, historical, cognitive, and it is also fundamentally physical and material, the orchestrated and improvisational activity of bodies and of things” (Rule, 429, original italics), which I see as essential for the FYC curriculum.

Another way this assignment is influenced by the comic book genre is by taking inspiration from a recent trend in the industry, where creators have been provided a deal with Substack, a newsletter hosting platform, to create and connect directly with readers. In addition to debuting and teasing comic book releases through their newsletters, creators have also taken to using the platform to provide an insight into their creative processes, among other forms of content. These newsletters are written in a very expressive yet detailed fashion and are also very multimodal, combining text, images, videos, audio, music and more to provide a robust look at each of the creators’ creative processes. The focus on the creation process is what drew my
attention the most and what was used as a template of sorts in my classroom, to provide students with an idea of what I was looking for with their assignment submissions. In my classes we looked at two Substack newsletters, one belonging to writer Kelly Thompson and the other belonging to cartoonist Jeff Lemire, as examples.

Finally, this assignment was designed around UTEP’s RWS 1301 Module 1 Course Objectives since the three-week period at the start of the semester is when I had students work on the assignment. Module 1 is titled “Taking Inventory” and the learning objectives consisted of: “1) Exploring texts 2) Experimenting with multimedia, and 3) Collaborative Project on studying texts, authorship, and the idea of composition” (Rosenberg et al., 14). Having taught RWS 1301 multiple times, both online, in-person, and as a hybrid of the two formats, I’ve become very familiar with the goals of this module in relation to the FYC curriculum. I’ve interpreted Module 1 as the “finding your feet” module, laying the groundwork which students will then build upon during the rest of the course. I think it makes sense to have students recognize the different types of writing that they are knowingly (and unknowingly) already composing before introducing different genres and purposes of writing throughout the rest of the semester. Authorship is another component of Module 1, so having students reflect on their writing processes in different contexts not only introduces the subjects of genre and audience, but also allows them to recognize what they do/who they are as writers. Lastly, this assignment asks students to work with multimedia in an active capacity, taking their own photos or sketching their own visual representations of their writing environments. I find the focus on multimodality to not only provide students with the opportunity to experiment with how to construct their compositions, but also challenge their understandings of what a composition can include. This assignment is as
much about the writing as it is about the writer, some of which is captured visually, which captures the essence of what Module 1 is about.

Upon conceptualizing the “Multimodal Composition Process Newsletter”, I also designed another assignment informed by my research into how visuals can factor into the FYC classroom. This other assignment I designed was titled the “9-Panel Writing Profile.” It asked students to fill out their own 9-panel comic grids with visuals (drawings, online images, symbols, etc.) relating to their personal experiences with writing and then reflect on their finished grid once it was completed. The intention behind this assignment was to tap into students’ creativity and skills in visual rhetoric, as they came up with visual representations for text, thus complimenting the Module 1 objectives of experimenting with multimodality and different kinds of texts. This assignment was discarded in favor of the “Multimodal Composing Process Newsletter” because the latter assignment tackles the core objectives of the RWS 1301 Module 1 curriculum in a more straightforward, thorough manner. Though the “9-Panel Writing Profile” will not be assigned in Module 1, it is an assignment I would still like to try in the future.

In preparation for introducing the “Multimodal Composition Process Newsletter” as the major assignment/project for Module 1, I included a series of scaffolding materials, activities, and smaller assignments for students to complete in the weeks prior to the assignment’s introduction. The scaffolding materials/activities for Module 1 consisted of three writing journals, various assigned readings from the course’s textbook, Habits of the Creative Mind (2020) by Richard E. Miller and Ann Jurecic, in-class free writing exercises and discussions, in-class reading activities and discussions, and one smaller assignment. Each of these scaffolding activities wove together themes of past writing experience/authorship, the composing process in
relation to one’s surroundings and how visuals can work together with texts to create richer understandings.

In my classes, the journals would allow students to personally reflect to the primary subjects of each week, for example in Week 1 students would write about their opinions about writing, in Week 2 about writing about subjects of interest, and in Week 3 about their opinions on reading. Upon describing how one’s environment may play a role in how their writing is produced and while hinting at the upcoming major assignment, I suggested that students consider writing these journals in different environments, so that they might then reflect on those experiences in the “Multimodal Composition Process Newsletter” assignment later. The free writing activities and class discussions served similar purposes of introducing concepts related to composition and authorship in anticipation of the major assignment.

The assigned readings from Habits of the Creative Mind each fulfilled a specific purpose for the week that they were assigned, for example the first reading, “On Thinking New Thoughts”, described a story about Henry David Thoreau’s creative process while situated out in the woods, introducing the idea of how one’s environment can influence their work. The “On Unlearning” reading challenged students to acknowledge that the types of writing they may have completed in high school were steppingstones for the writing they’d be completing at the university. Other readings that were completed in class included Lauren Marino’s “Rooms of their Own”, a web article about the rooms successful female authors composed in, the conclusion of Hannah Rule’s “Writing’s Rooms”, and three Substack newsletter posts from comic creators, one by Kelly Thompson and the other two by Jeff Lemire, about their creative processes. Each of these assigned readings reinforced the idea of the direct or indirect effects one’s surroundings
may have on their work and the broadening of the composition process to include an
acknowledgment of those surroundings through visual elements.

I also assigned a mini assignment in the first week of the semester, which was titled
“Writing Habits in Digital Spaces” and served as a precursor to the upcoming major assignment.
This smaller assignment asked students to identify and reflect upon their writing habits on the
internet, while texting friends and family, and when on social media. The intentions behinds this
assignment were to 1) help students recognize how prevalent writing is in their day-to-day lives
and 2) to introduce the concept of reflecting on a space/platform in preparation for the major
assignment that asked them to reflect on their physical surroundings.

Below is the lesson plan I designed and utilized during the first four weeks of the Spring
2022 semester:

Week 1 (Jan. 18-20)

Day 1

• Syllabus Overview
• Introduction to Module 1
• Class Discussion: What were your writing class like in high school?
• Free Write Activity: What comes to mind when thinking about writing in college?
• Assign Writing Journal 1: What does “writing” mean to you?
• Assign “On Thinking New Thoughts” Reading (Attached on Blackboard)

Day 2

• Writing Journal 1 Discussion
• “On Thinking New Thoughts” Discussion
• Lecture on Orienting Chapter
• Writing Journal #1 Discussion
• In-Class Reading: “Rooms of their Own”- Marino
• Assign Mini Assignment 1: Writing Habits in Digital Spaces

Week 2 (Jan 25-27)

Day 3

• “On Unlearning” Discussion
• Lecture on Beginning Chapter
• In-Class Reading: Excerpt from “Writing’s Rooms”-Rule
• Reading Discussion
• Assign Writing Journal 2: Have you ever written about something of genuine interest?

Day 4

• Mini Assignment 1 Due
• Writing Journal 2 Discussion
• Class Discussion: What do you think of technology that writes for you?
• In-Class Reading: Jeff Lemire and Kelly Thompson Substack Newsletter Posts
• Introduction to Major Assignment 1: Multimodal Newsletter

Week 3 (Feb 1-3)

Day 5
Before beginning the analysis portion of my project and to receive clearance to conduct teacher research in my classes, I sought IRB approval. While applying for IRB approval and in accordance with Human Subjects Research regulations, I developed an Information Sheet (see Appendix B) about my project and research, and an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) to hand out to my classes once approval was granted. Another step I took in securing IRB approval was clarifying how the results of my study would benefit me, as a graduate student researcher,
and the UTEP Writing Department RWS 1301 course curriculum, per the IRB Board’s categories of exemption. I clarified that once my project concluded, I would be submitting the assignment I used in my classes to the UTEP First Year Composition teaching materials repository, so that other instructors might utilize or expand upon the same assignment in their classes. My project received IRB approval on February 9, 2022.

After receiving IRB approval, on February 15, at the end of both RWS 1301 course periods, I provided my students with both the Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form, which detailed how their assignment submissions would be used for the purposes of my thesis research, were I to receive their permission. The following class period, February 17, I collected the signed consent forms from my students. I received a total of twenty-six consent forms from both classes, fourteen from the first class and twelve from the second class. Students were assured that granting their permission would not have any effect on their grade on the assignment or course standing. Furthermore, I did not look at their assignment submissions as thesis analysis materials until after I had assigned individual grades, which students were also made aware of before providing their permissions.
Findings and Analysis

I think the “Multimodal Composition Process Newsletter” major assignment went over well with my students in both RWS 1301 classes. At the end of Module 1 as a follow-up activity, I had my students complete in-class written reflections about the module. I asked my students to write about what they thought they had learned over the last three weeks and what themes about writing stood out or started to take shape for them. After they completed the written reflections, I had a few students at random share what they wrote aloud with the whole class for the purposes of class discussion and to potentially remind other students of what else had been covered. Many of my students’ reflections from the conclusion of Module 1, and even a few at the conclusion of Module 2, were about the Newsletter assignment. A few students noted that they had never considered their surroundings as a part of the writing process before, but after completing the assignment, they recognized that the influence of their environments is something that’s always impacting how they write. A few students echoed this sentiment in their final reflections within the assignment itself, one student wrote, “As I was writing what came to mind was how big of an impact our environments have on us and our writing. It is something I had never taken into consideration.” A few other students claimed that the Newsletter assignment was the activity that stood out to them the most because it wasn’t a traditional academic essay and was more reflective. They stated that they liked to be able to write about themselves and their writing processes. Most of my students identified that Module 1 was about recognizing themselves as writers. These reflections indicated that most of my students were picking up on the core objectives of the first learning module as well as my objectives for the major assignment.

After grading the assignments and compiling those I received permission to use for this project, I began breaking down my initial research question: How do students make meaning out
of textual and visual elements to understand authorship and composition? The first step in answering this question was to establish a coding system, which I would use to categorize the textual and visual elements used by students, the connections they made between these elements through direct quotes from their submissions, and the affects that these connections suggested. Of the twenty-six consent forms I received, only twenty-three students had actually submitted the assignment, so I coded a breakdown of all 23 assignment submissions into a spreadsheet. Within the spreadsheet, I highlighted the student submissions that I found to be the most descriptive/reflective of their writing processes based on the level of detail and acknowledgement of their writing processes in relation to the writing sample and their individual settings. Of the initial 23 submissions, I extracted 16 of them that I determined to be the most effective, reflective, and descriptive of their writing processes. The 7 not included were either too sparse, vague, or failed to follow the assignment’s instructions completely. I made a new spreadsheet out of these 16 submissions, organized by the affects I observed that the students were expressing in relation to their settings and writing processes in their reflections: comfort, focus, discomfort, distraction, and inspiration/mindfulness. As an example, Figure 1 includes an extracted collection of coded data from my original spreadsheet for some of the students who were given pseudonyms for their entry examples that are examined later in this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Reflection Excerpt Expressing Meaning-Making</th>
<th>Observed Affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Sabrina”</td>
<td>“The chair is comfy and can easily lead me to just take a nap in it but the desk in the picture keeps me from doing so, the desk is a great place to keep focus because there’s only enough space for my laptop so that prevents me from having more objects around me that can distract me.”</td>
<td>Focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Denise”</td>
<td>“My room is my own personal space where I can relax and enjoy silence if I like to. Going over the places I wrote the previous writing</td>
<td>Alone and focused</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
samples, I think that when it comes to writing, I like to be by myself. This way, I concentrate better and think more critically, which is what I needed to do to complete this assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Simon”</th>
<th>“I lay on the floor, stare at the ceiling, pace around, do whatever while I type out the words that come to mind, before sitting back down and resuming. And it all flows naturally.”</th>
<th>Comfortable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Tony”</td>
<td>“I found that writing at this location was much more productive. When writing on my iPad, I don’t have multiple screens and can’t be as easily distracted compared to when writing at home. I finished the excerpt in around 15 minutes, which was half of the time it took me to write Journal 1.”</td>
<td>Focused and Productive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Marco”</td>
<td>“The reason being is I would constantly hear a lot of talking, phones ringing, and a lot more of just overall noise. This had distracted me and affected my critical thinking as I was constantly getting lost in what I was doing and furthermore just not helping me overall in my writing process.”</td>
<td>Distracted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Emily”</td>
<td>“The writing process for the whole assignment did become rushed by the distractions as well as the anticipation of playing video games and talking with my best friend, but I don’t think it turned out too bad in the end, just curt.”</td>
<td>Distracted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Christina”</td>
<td>“At that moment, I froze. I pondered, hovered over to my chair, laid in my bed, took long water breaks—with the same lingering thought, what is my relationship with writing.”</td>
<td>Mindful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Extracted First Level of Coding Spreadsheet

The following section provides specific examples I received from my students about their meaning making of the writing process within different settings. All students’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms I’ve chosen, to retain confidentiality.

After sorting and reading through all the assignments while developing the coding system, I noticed recurring themes. These themes included the identification of the affects that
students experienced in relation to the settings they composed in. This was both expected and unexpected, because in the assignment’s instructions, I asked my students to describe the possible effects that different environments may have had on their composing process. I was expecting entries about how one environment was more conducive to composing than another or vice versa. What surprised me was that students did make those observations, but only through first identifying how an environment made them feel or by describing what affects an environment stirred up. It is in instances like this where I see meaning being made between the students’ surroundings, their writing, and themselves as authors. Upon reflection of their composing process, my students identified their affects like comfort, focus, distraction, discomfort, and mindfulness and inspiration all being exchanged between their environment, themselves, and the writing samples they produced. For example, the following quotes from my students’ reflection capture some of these affects:

• …I use this setting [bedroom desk] to do most of my homework and it is an environment where I feel comfortable expressing my thoughts and my creative side seems to do its best when I am here. I try to make the space I work in comfortable for me so that I can think of more ideas without too many distractions.

• The setting [living room] was quite helpful since it was open and empty. Because of those reasons it was easier for me to concentrate on writing freely.

• By looking at the setting I was trying to accomplish this journal, made me get frustrated and confused. Working on my living room does get me a little distracted.
• The chairs in my dining room are a bit tall so when I’m sitting regularly I kind of have to hunch to see my laptop, it was super uncomfortable writing while being hunched and you can totally see a length difference in this journal and the previous one.

• I feel like I gain a broader perspective in this environment [bedroom desk] and can think through most problems or ideas openly. It’s a much cleaner and more controlled environment than what I expect outside of my house and permits me to think through my thoughts.

Another realization I had while looking over my students’ submissions was how the meanings they described about their composing experiences were captured within the visual elements they included above each of their reflections when paired with the image or excerpt of the writing sample composed in that environment, as a part of the assignment’s format. Students included various photographs and sketches of bedrooms, desks, kitchens, rooms in their houses, and various locations from around the university that, while meaning very little to me, clearly held prominent meaning for them. What these visual elements captured reminded me of Rule’s study and her claim that, “As a representational mode, photographs deliver something that words alone would struggle to create: the sense of comportment, inhabitation, the social and material atmospheres…” (416). I agree with Rule; the more I read my students’ reflections I came to understand that what was being captured within each of their images was more than just desks and beds and tables, but personal and intimate feelings. For example, Valeria’s reflection on her bedroom’s influence on her composition of Writing Journal #1 (Figure 2), “The reason why I like finishing my homework, or my studies in my room, is because I like the feeling of feeling comfortable and silent. I do believe this are one of the two most important reasons we need to
feel, to overcome in our studies” Based on Valeria’s reflection, the feeling of comfort is very important to her when she is composing, and she connects that sensation with the surroundings of her silent bedroom. In this example, Valeria has made meaning out of her surroundings and connected that meaning with her composing process. Furthermore, Valeria has also captured that meaning visually within the image of her bedroom that she attached, next to her writing sample.

![Writing journal #1](image)

Figure 2. Valeria’s Composing Setting and Writing Journal 1 Excerpt

The affect that was most frequently expressed by my students about their compositions and the environments they composed in was that of comfort. The descriptions of these affects were accompanied by images or sketches of the students’ bedrooms or other personally significant environments, like in their cars or kitchens. Reflecting upon the major assignment itself and underneath an image of her bed with a plush animal (Figure 3), one student, Sabrina, commented:
As you can see in the image above, I’m in a super comfortable setting right now. This is probably the most comfortable setting I’ve written in and its helping me formulate my sentences easier. I have a lot of trouble with overthinking my sentences but when I’m relaxed I can feel the words come out a lot easier and I think that’s thanks to writing in the comfort of my bed.

Sabrina connects her surroundings to her thought-process to her composing process, concluding that writing comes easier when she is in a relaxed state of mind. The environment impacts the writer, which then impacts the writing. There is also an element of agency being ascribed to her environment, as Sabrina states that her bedroom is “helping” her compose. Ascribing agency to inanimate objects or rooms is a theme that reoccurs throughout a few student reflections in these assignment submissions. I interpret this inclusion/detail as a signifier of the relationship the student has with their environment, an intimate bond the student shares with that space or object.

![Sabrina’s Reflection of Major Assignment 1](image)

Figure 3. Sabrina’s Reflection of Major Assignment 1

The element of ascribed agency within a comfortable space is repeated by another student, Simon, who underneath an image of their bedroom floor and computer monitor, reflects
on his composition of Writing Journal #2 (Figure 4), “I end up using my bedroom; which while a mess, provides a nice comfort. It allows me to think and ponder at my own pace, and in this case, reminiscence about older assignments for the topic of writing over something of my own interest.” Simon claims the room “allows” him to be mindful as he composes his journal entry. I find these instances of ascribed agency interesting because they reveal a relationship that exists solely between the author and their environment, which is then reflected in the writing being composed. Both Sabrina and Simon identify that their rooms play some sort of active role in the way they write, which clarifies how their surroundings and the feelings generated within, are a part of their composing processes. Simon also connected the comfort of his bedroom with what he expressed in his journal entry, which included his personal opinions about writing, suggesting that feeling comfortable in his bedroom helped him express himself more easily.

“It is to me a means to share my own feelings to the world and I have used it as such, even if a majority has been assignments only, I still put my earnest and truthful ideals into it, and try to share what I feel the best I am.”

Figure 4. Simon’s Composing Setting and Writing Journal 2 Excerpt
Another affect expressed by many of my students upon reflection of their past writing samples was that of focus, which they found lends itself to productivity. Looking at the twelve samples that I observed conveyed a sense of focus, I found it interesting that half of them were composed in environments located in various locations around the university, especially the University Library. In her reflection about Writing Journal #1, and underneath a sketch of the UTEP Library’s fourth floor layout of bookcases and desks (Figure 5), Denise wrote, “In my opinion, the UTEP Library (specially the fourth floor) is the perfect place to complete your schoolwork. It is quiet, and I can work without distractions. I entered the library, bought a matcha, went to the fourth floor, sat down, opened my laptop, and began writing the journal.” It is interesting to read about this student’s practice of buying a drink, navigating the library space, and finally settling in to write because it illustrates how she enters the mindset of a writer; only once all these steps have been accomplished does she then feel prepared to begin writing, as she states, “Surrounded by other people, I was still by myself which made me relax and think clearly about the journal topic: what writing meant to me.” Denise’s description of her practice before composing is revealing because it demonstrates how the student and the space are in conversation with one another. Denise works within the space’s features (buying a drink in its cafe, travelling up its stairs to the fourth floor, settling down at an empty desk) and uses those features to her benefit by entering a productive mindset to write. It is like she is creating a setting all her own for the purposes of composing within a setting shared with other students.
Another student, Kim, also described feeling focused while composing the major assignment at the university, during one of her classes in the UTEP Physical Sciences Building (Figure 6):

I know I should focus on this class, but I find this setting to be somewhere where I am forced to sit and focus on whatever it is I am completing. Majority of the time I take notes, but I use the opportunity of the background noise to my benefit. I work well surrounded by a lot of movement so when I can, I complete other work from different classes and will watch back the lectures from that day and catch up on the notes by myself elsewhere.

Kim is detailing both her composition and learning process, specifying that she feels that she composes best when she’s forced to sit still and is surrounded by a lot of noise, the qualities of being in a classroom. This is another revealing instance of how the setting influences the student, and how that influence is impressed upon the writing. Kim, knowing what works best for her composition process, uses the constraints placed upon her in the classroom (not being able to get up, get distracted, and being surrounded by others) to her advantage. Kim’s reflection suggests
that she is engaging with the meaning she’s attributed to her surroundings (that her classroom allows for focus) and describes that meaning as a part of her writing process.

A few students specified feeling distracted when reflecting on their previous writing samples, such as Tony who, while reflecting on Writing Journal #1 wrote “I was a little bit distracted by the internet which I find is sometimes an issue when doing work at this desk. Unless I consciously decide that I am going to do work and only work, and not allow myself to get distracted.” Tony’s reflection was accompanied by an image of his bedroom desk, with his two computer monitors lit up (Figure 7). Tony describes his writing process as a “conscious” decision to work, trying his best to combat distractions. In a later reflection on his writing process of the major assignment itself, in the same location, Tony writes “I made a few changes. I turned off my second monitor, and made the conscious effort to not be distracted.” This reflection was accompanied by an image of the same desk and monitors, though the monitor on the right was turned off (Figure 8). I found Tony’s reflection revealing because of the elements
he had chosen to make a part of his writing process: the presence and influence of his second computer monitor. It’s a significant inclusion that is both revealing of what elements within the setting the student chooses to make a part of their composing process, and again repeats the theme of ascribing agency to inanimate objects within the environment. To Tony, his second computer monitor isn’t just a feature of his desk, it’s a lure away from his work that actively distracts him. I also found it interesting that Tony decided to use this assignment of reflecting on past writing samples as a learning opportunity, indicating what didn’t work in an earlier instance of composing and modifying the setting to try to be more productive in a later instance. This connects with Tony’s inclusion of the word “conscious” in relation to his writing, he’s conscious of the influence of distractions, conscious of his decision to begin working, and conscious of what didn’t work in an earlier instance of composing that had been rectified in a later instance. The visual elements Tony included with his reflection (Figures 7-8) not only depict his feeling of distraction, but also his conscious decisions.

Figure 7. Tony’s Composing Setting for Writing Journal 1

Figure 8. Tony’s Composing Setting for Major Assignment 1
Underneath a sketch of a table in the UTEP Union (Figure 9), Diana described the effects of being distracted on her composing of Writing Journal #1, stating “My environment was distracting and noisy, my state of mind was stressed, and I had been busy all week. These factors had an impact on my writing skills because I wasn’t able to focus properly which made my assignment more stressful than it had to be.” Diana is drawing a connection between the loud environment of the student union and her stressed state of mind, which resulted in a negative composing experience. Diana’s sketch (Figure 9) demonstrates the meaning that she associated with her surroundings, since she chose to visually depict students walking past her table, speaking loudly on the phone. Diana’s reflection exemplifies how setting is as much a part of the writing process as the writer and the writer’s state of mind since she connected the distractive environment and her preoccupied mindset to having a direct impact on her composing.

A few students wrote about feeling uncomfortable, working in spaces of discomfort, and the negative impact they believe this had on their writing. Emily recounted the experience of working on Writing Journal #2 in her car underneath a picture of her steering wheel (Figure 10),
“I do think the setting I was writing in affected my journal entry; the cold was overall uncomfortable and caused a bit of a stinging pain for my fingertips. It definitely sped up my writing process, and probably shortened the amount I had been going to write.” Emily draws a connection between the awkward environment making her feel uncomfortable, which went on to have a negative, rushed impact on her writing; an opposite experience when compared to the comfort and ease of writing described by Sabrina while in her bedroom. When reading Emily’s reflection and looking at her included visual element of her steering wheel, I’m reminded of what Rule had to say about how atmosphere is captured in the image. To me, an outsider, there’s nothing in Emily’s photo or journal entry indicating discomfort, yet to her, that’s exactly what has been captured, which not only exemplifies how students make meaning out of their settings, but also how visual and textual elements can work together to create fuller understandings of the composition process.

Figure 9. Emily’s Composing Setting

Figure 10. Emily’s Composing Setting and Writing Journal 2 Excerpt

‘Writing fiction does more than help me explore my interests, it expands them past their borders into topics and fields I hadn’t previously known of, and it teaches me about the differences and similarities fiction has with the modern world.’
Another student, Ricardo, also described composing while feeling some discomfort, reflecting on his process of composing Writing Journal #3 at the UTEP Union’s Computer Lab for the first time (Figure 11) as,

I didn’t feel uncomfortable in this place, however I did noticed that I was struggling to get some ideas for this journal. The relationship between the journal and the setting it was composed in is that I reflect some of the ideas of not being in a comfortable space in this journal and how it affects my writing in sort of a negative way.

Ricardo acknowledged that the discomfort he associated with the UTEP Union Computer Lab directly influenced his composition process by having a difficult time coming up with material to write about. I found it interesting that in Ricardo’s reflection, he also made a connection between what he wrote in the journal and the setting by referring to his discomfort. In his entry for Writing Journal #3, Ricardo described some negative attitudes he had toward reading (Figure 11), which may have been influenced by the unnatural setting he was composing within. Ricardo was writing in an uncomfortable location, initially struggled to come up with ideas, and once he did decide what he was going to write about he ended up describing negative opinions, suggesting a direct connection between where he wrote, how he wrote, and what he wrote.

![Writing Sample #2: RWS 1301 Writing Journal #3:

**Setting where Journal #3 was written**

**Excerpt of Journal #3**

*Reading is something I have always avoided in a way. Ever since I was in elementary school, I have never been able to concentrate when I’m reading, I always saw it as something boring and it just wasn’t for me.*

Figure 11. Ricardo’s Composing Setting and Writing Journal 3 Except
A state of mind a few students identified upon reflection of their composing processes in the various environments of their choice was that of inspiration. Marco, who visited El Paso’s International Museum of Art and included an image of the museum’s exterior (Figure 12) while reflecting on how he composed this major assignment, wrote

The atmosphere that the building gave was quite amazing as this a historical house that served many purposes and in a way by doing my work here I felt inspired yet calm from the feeling of something vintage. Though there weren’t any or as many sound distractions as the previous places I did, my journal entries in. This one is my favorite as it solved that issue of both sound and other types of distractions while giving a feeling of inspiration in some sort of way.

In previous reflections in his assignment, Marco identified that composing in his room was too relaxing, which allowed for distraction and kept him from writing, while composing at the university was too distracting for being too loud. Like Tony, Marco used this assignment as a learning opportunity by seeking out new spaces and discovering what worked for him and what didn’t, eventually settling on finding the right space at the museum. In his reflection, Marco also considers the meaning he places on the museum and its contents (inspiring), and how that meaning influences the way he writes in a positive way. Christina also hints at feeling inspired as she reflected on the same major assignment, underneath a sketch of her desk within her room (Figure 13):

I thought about how a lot of my writing came to life in my room. The place where I’m currently sitting down has made a lot of good pieces. I’ve had a good run for a couple of years. It is now 12:20 A.M., way past the due date, and extremely dark outside. Despite my neighbors having a party next door, I’d say I had a blast doing this assignment.
Christina describes inspiration being found in the room around her, as it brought back memories of previous completed work and positively influenced how she completed this assignment, even if it was past due. Both Marco and Christina describe the personal connections they have with their spaces and connect that to a positive composing experience, which suggests the influence one’s setting can have on what is composed within that space.

Figure 12. Marco’s Reflection of Major Assignment 1

Honestly, I had no idea how even to start this assignment. I thought a lot about drawing decent pictures of my workspaces and doing a whole artistic project. However, I had no time to do it. I lost time with the drawing. During class yesterday, I gathered the few thoughts I had lingering in my mind and started with the “behind the scenes” paragraph for Journal #1. When class ended, I left for the El Paso Natural Gas Conference Center to finish Journal #1 so that I could have fewer things to worry about. At almost 7 P.M., I arrived home. While I made

Figure 13. Christina’s Reflection of Major Assignment 1
Conclusions

After analyzing and interpreting my students’ reflections from my assignment, I was left with a few answers to my research question of how students make meaning out of textual and visual elements to understand authorship and composition. The Newsletter assignment provided my students with the opportunity to recognize and reflect on their practices as authors under various circumstances and for a variety of writing samples. By adding the visual component to this assignment, I think their understanding of “authorship” and “composition” was broadened. Not only had students described composing as an internal, mental practice, but as an external, environmentally considerate practice as well. By capturing all the different settings that they composed in, they added an element of expressed affects to their understanding of composing. Students were able to recognize and acknowledge the impact their surroundings may have had on them, and how that had affected their writing.

Beyond the broader understanding of composition and authorship was the fact that so many students were making meaning out of their surroundings through the identification of their affects attached or related to their environments. Students described feeling comfortable, focused, distracted, uncomfortable, and inspired within a variety of settings, and beyond that, identified how these affects were influencing their writing. I find the identification of these affects noteworthy, because it clarifies how students are understanding their environments a part of their composition processes. Certain settings make students feel a specific way, and those feelings impact how the student composes, such as when Sabrina identified feeling comfortable in her bedroom and this having a positive effect on how and what she wrote, or when Ricardo identified feeling uncomfortable in the university union, which resulted in a negative writing process of negative subject matter. Other details about how students interacted with their
environments were included as well, such as a few students who clarified the personal connection they had to their environment by ascribing agency to the room or objects within the room that impacted how they wrote, like Simon identifying how his bedroom helps him write through the feelings of comfort he maintains. Other students described how their environments impacted their mindsets, again making the setting a part of the composition process, such as Denise who described the practice she engages within the university library before writing or how Kim used the constraints of her classroom to focus on writing.

Also noteworthy was how students were able to capture these affects visually, when paired with their writing samples. By having students include the visual elements of photographs or sketches of their surroundings from when they composed, they were able not only to identify what they were feeling in their textual reflections, but capture those affects in their images. By including the visual elements as a part of their reflections, students reflected upon the meaning they associated with that environment and acknowledged how that meaning influenced their writing. This resulted in the inclusion of visual representations for all the expressed affects the students identified, such as Emily’s image of the inside of her car representing discomfort or Marco’s image of the International Museum of Art representing inspiration when paired with the writing samples produced in those environments.

While looking over each of these visual elements and thinking about how they captured both visible locations and the invisible affects my students associated with them, I started thinking more about writing and the way I would teach the subject in class. I was reminded of a quote from our textbook by Richard E. Miller and Ann Jurecic which states, “Words make thoughts possible; they enable us to see things we’ve never seen and to hear things we’ve never heard…” (153), essentially that the act of composing visualizes our invisible thoughts and
emotions. In a way, I think that’s what’s been accomplished with this assignment, twice. Textually, students captured an aspect of their composition process through descriptions in their written reflections and visually, students captured another aspect of that process, through the meaning made between themselves and their environments. By being able to look at their settings (and the affects captured within) on one side of the page and the writing composed within that setting on the other side of the page, I found that my students effectively made meaning between the two, which resulted in their understanding more fully of who they are as authors and many of the elements of the composition process.

Completing this assignment with my classes and looking closely at their submissions in relation to this project, I’m reaffirmed in my belief in using visual elements as learning materials within the FYC classroom to develop stronger, lasting understandings of course concepts. This assignment provided my students with the opportunity to broaden their understanding of composing and their roles as authors. I’ve found that each of the RWS 1301 learning modules focuses on an aspect of broadening the understanding of the composition process. The major assignment in this module allowed my students to consider their environments and their affects therein as elements that shape how they write. Module 2 considers the impact students’ past literacy experiences have on the present, Module 3 considers the influence of an audience, Module 4 the influence of research, and Module 5 the influence of a visual presentation. In consideration of all these influences, I think my assignment provides a good starting point for introducing additional factors influencing the act of composing. I am also pleased that my students were able to develop these broadened understandings through the method of meaning-making found in comic books, the medium that inspired much of this project, by interpreting textual and visual elements together.
References


Appendix A

Major Assignment 1:

Multimodal Composing Process Newsletter

During this first module, we’ve focused on the practical and expressive purposes of writing, in addition to authorship and the composition process. With this assignment, we’ll be tying all these conceptions of writing together by exploring your individual composing processes for different types of writing under different contexts.

To complete this assignment, think back to some of what we’ve gone over in class in relation to the composing process:

1. The comic book creator *Substack* Newsletters
2. Rule’s “Writing’s Rooms”
3. Miller and Jurecic’s “On Thinking New Thoughts”
4. Marino’s “Rooms of Their Own”
5. Mini Assignment 1: Writing Habits in Digital Spaces

One of the goals here is to expand our understanding of the writing process, by looking at it beyond its goal-driven nature, but as an extension of our thoughts/selves. Taking into consideration our surroundings, how those surroundings influence us, and what that does to our writing are some of the steps toward that expanded understanding.

Multimodality is another key component to this assignment: considering different writing formats and genres. One way of incorporating multimodality into this assignment is by working with your excerpts/images of your writing samples in addition to your textual descriptions and reflections.

This assignment will provide you with the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a writer/author, while also revealing what your writing process is like under different circumstances. It not only highlights the *writing*, but the *writer* as well. This process of reflection also prepares us for the rest of the semester, laying the groundwork for where you find yourself as a writer in preparation of the different types of writing to come.
Multimodal Composing Process Newsletter Guidelines

Develop your own newsletter providing behind the scenes access to your writing process for 3 writing samples, one of which will be this very assignment. For the other two writing samples, you will be reflecting on the previous journals (Writing Journal #1, #2, or #3) that you’ve completed for this class.

For each of the 3 writing examples, include the following:

- An excerpt/image* of the writing sample you’re describing.
- A visual representation** of the setting you wrote that writing sample in.
- A reflection paragraph underneath the above images that
  - Describes what your writing process was like.
    - How did you start writing?
    - What materials did you use?
    - What was on your mind as you wrote?
  - Makes a connection between your writing and your surroundings.
    - What impact do you think your surroundings had on what you wrote?
    - How may your surroundings influence your writing?

*You will not need to include any image or excerpt for the entry about this assignment.

**When considering your writing setting, you can attach a photograph, compose a drawing/sketch, or even consider illustrating your mental state at the time of writing. Only include a visual of your setting that you’re comfortable with using for this assignment.

Note: If you’re using the same writing environment for multiple entries, try differentiating them in some way, either by time of day (day/night) or by using a different location within that environment.
Evaluation Criteria

- 3 Paragraphs about 3 different writing samples
  - One about this assignment
  - The other two about previously completed Writing Journals.
- Adequate reflection on your writing process for each writing sample.
- A connection between your writing and your setting.
- Incorporation of 3 images and 2 writing sample excerpts (no excerpt for the entry about this assignment).
- Submission of the assignment by the due date.

This assignment will be due February 8th, 2022, at 11:00 PM, in the Module 2, Week 4 folder on Blackboard.

Newsletter Entry Example:

Sebastian’s Composing Process

Writing Sample #1: RWS 1301 Writing Journal #1

Visual representation of the setting this writing sample was composed in.

Image/Excerpt of this writing sample.

-A paragraph describing/reflecting on your writing process for the above writing sample and what connection there may be between your writing and the setting you composed in.
Appendix B

Project Information Sheet

Constructing Meaning through Textual and Visual Elements in the First-Year Composition Classroom

Welcome to RWS 1301!

Over the course of this semester, we’ll be learning about authorship, different methods of composition, literacy, audience, rhetoric, research, and visual presentation.

In addition to teaching your class this semester, I’m also working on my thesis, a portion of which will consist of the study of an assignment that will be completed in this class!

This project will focus on the first Major Assignment we complete during Module 1 of class. Major Assignment 1 serves two purposes: it’s a culmination of all that we’ve learned during the first module, and it will inform some of the research I’m doing about making meaning out of textual and visual elements.

What is Major Assignment 1?

The “Multimodal Composition Newsletter” will consist of your descriptions of your writing processes for three different writing samples we’ve completed in class so far. For each writing sample, you will include an image of the setting you composed within, an excerpt of the writing sample, and a reflective paragraph describing your writing process. You’re essentially “filling in the gutter-space” between your image and writing excerpt by making meaning out of the two about your writing process.

Should this assignment prove beneficial to the purposes of Module 1 within the RWS 1301 curriculum, it can be used to improve the curriculum by being added to a materials repository for other RWS 1301 instructors to use in their own courses.

Why am I interested in this type of project?

I’m a big comic book fan and the reading and understanding of comics is sort of what inspires this assignment and study: making meaning out of images and text. In comics, meaning is uniquely constructed between the panels: your mind fills in the gap between them to understand what took place from one panel to the next. I want to see how this approach of making meaning can be applied to the writing classroom, about the topics we’ll be going over during Module 1, like authorship and composition.
Appendix C

Permission Request Consent Form

Key Information

You are invited to take part in the following research study: Constructing Meaning through Textual and Visual Elements in the First-Year Composition Classroom

Researcher: The person conducting this study is Sebastian Martinez

WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES AND PROCEDURES OF THIS STUDY?

The major purpose of this study is for me to gather material for my master’s thesis in Rhetoric and Writing Studies. A second purpose is for determining how this assignment can be incorporated into other RWS 1301 courses, to the benefit of the First-Year Composition curriculum. My project is about making meaning of authorship and composition through a combination of textual and visual elements. The writing you compose for the Module 1 Major Assignment for RWS 1301 may be useful for this study.

Your participation in this project is limited to you providing me with your permission to use your routine, already graded, course assignment for Module 1 for an additional purpose, my research.

WHY AM I ASKING YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a student in RWS 1301 in Spring 2022. Your participation in this project is limited to you providing me with permission to use your writing samples and assignments for analysis. With your permission, I will only use your writing after your assignment has been submitted and graded.

WHAT IS THE DURATION OF THIS STUDY?

This study will only focus on topics covered during the first three weeks of the course from January 18, 2022 to February 3, 2022. Topics and the assignment used for study are routine and will require no additional time outside of the course.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND RISKS OF YOUR PARTICIPATION?

There are no individual benefits of participation.

Benefits to society include the potential for the assignment analyzed during this study to improve the RWS 1301 course curriculum and be used by other RWS 1301 instructors.

The likelihood for risk is minimal, though privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, due to the nature of the research environment and the electronic platforms being used.

You have the right to withdraw your permission for me to use your writing for this study. Choosing to withdraw or not participate will not affect your grades, nor class or university standing.
CONFIDENTIALITY

All data and analysis of data will use pseudonyms for participants; however, I will know who authored each assignment. All writing samples that are submitted will be saved to my password-protected computer and backed up on my Microsoft OneDrive using participants’ pseudonyms. Privacy and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the nature of the research environment and the electronic platforms that will be used. All data will be retained for at least five years after final publication.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR WANT TO WITHDRAW

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. If you decide to take part in the study, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The Principal Investigator (PI) at The University of Texas at El Paso, Department of English in charge of this study is Sebastian Martinez who may be reached at semartinez3@miners.utep.edu

If you have questions about this study, you may email me, or you may contact my thesis advisor and supervisor, Dr. Lauren Rosenberg, Director of First-Year Composition, at lmrosenberg@utep.edu.

If you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at irb.orsp@utep.edu or 915-747-6590.

A copy of this form is available for you to keep.

Subject’s Name_______________________________________

Subject’s Signature____________________________________ Date _____________________
Curriculum Vita

My name is Sebastian Ezequiel Martinez and I have Bachelor of Arts in English and American Literature. I also have a Graduate Certificate in Technical and Professional Writing. I have a year and a half’s worth experience teaching Rhetoric and Composition 1 at the University of Texas at El Paso as a Teaching Assistant. Aside from that, I have half a year’s worth experience as a tutor at the Miner Athlete Academic Center at the University of Texas at El Paso, and a year’s worth experience as a consultant and intern at the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at El Paso.

My academic and professional areas of interest include visual rhetoric, visual pedagogy, first-year composition pedagogy, and writing center pedagogy.

My contact email is: semartinez3@miners.utep.edu