Multimodality refers to the various resources—among them, images, sounds, document design, and graphics—that authors tap to create meaning in all kinds of texts. Writers from earliest times drew on multiple modalities when writing, whether they were composers using color and design on cave walls; medieval scribes using layout and iconography on manuscripts; writers of manuals using tables and charts to share information; authors of presentation slides using video to provide dynamic evidence; or web designers using layout and font size and style to assist readers with navigation. Multimodality thus doesn’t refer specifically to creating texts with digital technologies, but many scholars say that digital technologies can make multimodality both more visible and easier to employ. In a first-year composition class, students can expect to compose texts requiring multimodality, ranging from print texts with “minimal” multimodality—words, layout, and font size and style—to blogs with a fuller multimodal representation—including images, photos, banners, words, and podcasts.

Multimodality reminds us of the richness of all texts, and of the many ways we create meaning. Interestingly, small children—mixing drawing, colors, letters, and layout—seem to compose multimodally almost “naturally.” It may be that engaging in the same kind of “multimodal play” would benefit many composers: it’s often through such “play” that we see alternative ways of seeing and of making meaning.

Resources


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