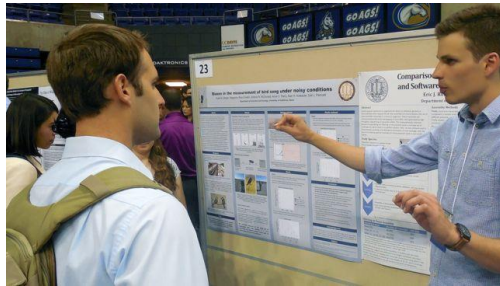


Multimodal Assignments: Writing for the Digital Age

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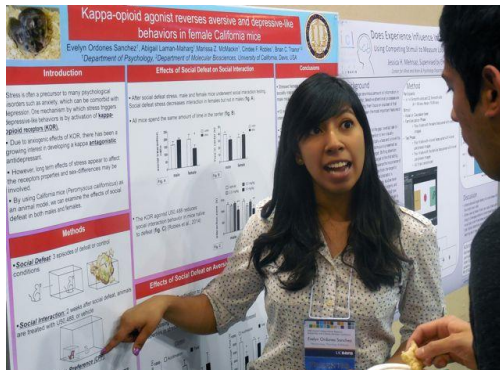
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TAGS: writing, multimodal, design, research



Student describes research at Undergraduate Research Conference

I just visited the annual Undergraduate Research Conference in the ARC Pavilion at UCD, and was once again—as every year—amazed by the knowledge, energy, and confident presence of our student researchers. I was also amazed by the rich uses of text, images, color, and layout in the posters before which the proud presenters stood. The quality and variety of the poster sessions at the URC rivals that of professional conferences—and easily surpasses most in the diversity of disciplines and styles represented.



Caption: Student explains project at Undergraduate Research Conference

When I have on occasion asked individual presenters to talk about how they have learned to design their posters, most credit advice and assistance from their PIs and co-researchers. Few mention having had formal training in design or prior experience in classes. Some, though, do note high school science fairs for which they had created posters or displays.

“Multimodal composing”—blends of words, pictures, charts, graphs, tables, audio, and/or video—is all around us today. A huge percentage of us, including almost all

of our students, routinely use diverse modes in social networking. From young ages, students are becoming adept at inserting visual and audio files into messages on Facebook and other platforms.

Even the articles in peer-reviewed journals, such as those analyzed by the science majors I teach in Writing in Science (UWP 104E), include an array of visuals—charts, graphs, tables, photos, drawings—to supplement and clarify written text. Videos are becoming more and more common in research reports, as well as in disciplinary blogs written by researchers.

With multimodal composing becoming common in research across disciplines, how are our students in the research university being prepared for this 21st century communications environment?

A systematic survey of multimodal assignments has not been done as yet at UCD, but informal polls of my Writing in Science students (juniors and seniors) reveal few students having been assigned to write multimodally in their majors, even though all of them are reading multimodal texts and web resources created by others. However, a recent survey at another large state university (Remley, 2014) revealed that as many as 25% of responding faculty across disciplines assigned some sort of multimodal writing, most frequently PowerPoint presentations with audio or visual components.

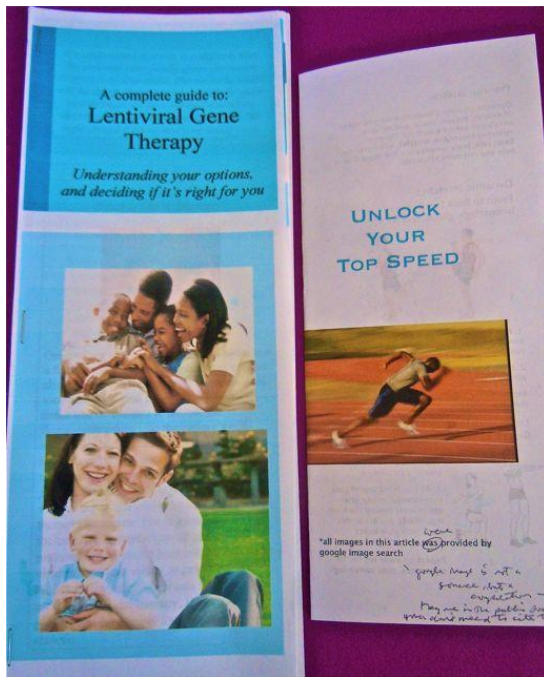
To give students the creative challenge of composing multimodally in an academic environment, I assign to my Writing in Science classes the “Popular Science Project.” Aspects of the assignment are as follows:

- Each student chooses a topic based on their scientific research interests, most often topics they are developing in course teams for a formal review of research.
- Each identifies a non-specialist audience (e.g., voters, consumers, government officials, children, parents, medical patients) whom the student feels can use the results of the research.
- Each then chooses a genre (e.g., website, brochure, feature article, poster/display, children’s book, blog, etc.) to deliver the research message to that audience, using the most appropriate language and visual/audio supplements.
- I approve their topics and proposals, then fellow students critique drafts of their multimodal creations, before students revise and submit the products.

In a recent quarter, projects included, among many others,

- An Instagram post and blog entry, with photos, on prenatal nutrition for teens

- A photos-and-graphs article for the science section of a mass-circulation newspaper about the benefits of enrichment activities for primates in captivity
- A photo essay for a popular news magazine on gene therapy for chronic lymphocytic leukemia
- An illustrated children’s book advocating a probiotic diet
- An 8-page illustrated guide for travelers on do’s and don’ts of ecotourism



Caption: Brochures on gene therapy and on physical training

Not only does the assignment teach writers to use varied tools to reach new audiences, but also students enjoy the opportunity to translate their passions for research into their teaching of others.

Source:

Remley, Dirk (2014). "Writing in Web-based Disciplinary Courses: New Media, New Disciplinary Composing Expectations." *Computers and Composition* 32, 1–18.