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# Bridging the Gap: Transcending Multimodal Pedagogies Used in Composition Courses to Teach Literature

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Bridging the Gap: Transcending Multimodal Pedagogies Used in Composition  
Courses to Teach Literature

By

Lucy Anne Johnson

THESIS

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Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Lucy Anne Johnson is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### Multimodality

By

Lucy Anne Johnson

This thesis focuses on the argument of integrating multimodal pedagogy into the literature classroom. First, the concept of multimodality is fleshed out, offering specific research behind the need to accommodate different learning styles present within the classroom. From there, the discussion of what current multimodal practices have successfully been integrated into composition classrooms is introduced and evaluated. In discussing these practices and strategies, how to encourage multimodal practice in literature classrooms is explored as the interdisciplinary model that multimodality works in allows it to be effectively integrated into a wide array of disciplines. As a result, the gap between composition and literature is effectively connected through multimodal practice. The last chapter provides a discussion of what integrating multimodality into the literature classroom really all means, and how to utilize multimodal pedagogy to successfully teach composition and literature.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. Without their encouragement and support I would not possess the motivation to continue my studies at the professional level.

I'd also like to dedicate my thesis to my dog Charlie, for always providing me with the unconditional love and happiness that the companionship of owning a dog offers.

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I'd like to thank Dr. Gabriel Brahm, for showing me the type of teacher I someday hope to become. Being in Dr. Brahm's classroom is like watching a movie you can't tear your eyes away from. Watching someone lecture about material he genuinely believes in and is passionate about gives me the motivation to one day captivate my audience the way that he's captivated me as

a student. I hope to inspire my classroom the way that he has shown me is possible.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my parents. Without their support and encouragement I would have never enrolled in a graduate program. When I've wanted to throw in the towel and give up, they've always pushed me to be the best that I can be because they've always seen my potential. I am eternally grateful for their guidance and unconditional love; without it I would not be where I am today.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## Understanding Multimodality: What and Why

With the rise of knowledge pertaining to how the brain interprets and gathers information, teachers are grappling with the mastery of accommodating a diverse learning audience. The phrase “out with the old and in with the new” is adapted in an attempt to understand how to better serve students who learn by other media beyond the traditional methods of lecture or chalkboard. This is especially evident in the liberal arts curriculum dating back to Socrates in Ancient Greece. Since then, universities and colleges have deemed liberal arts requirements an essential component of a Bachelor’s degree in a four year institution. One of the key components of a liberal studies program is generally writing; because of the diverse learning needs of students enrolled in a composition course, writing instructor’s need to think differently about how they craft and deliver instruction.

Studies indicate that there are several ways in which individuals learn. Jessica Utts, a professor within the Department of Statistics at the University of California at Irvine found that, “42% of people learn visually while 6% thrive off of aural or auditory learning” (Utts 7). Taking this into account, how to instructors accommodate an audience that learns through diverse media in a

composition classroom? By integrating a multimodal approach to teaching composition in the liberal arts paradigm, teachers can address diverse student learning populations by adhering to their preferred learning styles.

The term multimodal refers to the use of sensory modalities by which humans receive information. Because individuals learn differently, in order to efficiently accommodate a diverse learning audience, multiple modalities must be incorporated into a presentation. Dr. Kristin Arola of Washington State University breaks down the term multimodal and gives an overview of what each component entails:

The word multimodal is a mash---up of multiple and mode. A mode is the resource through which communication is expressed, such as the words (a linguistic mode) we're using to communicate our ideas in this paragraph. Multimodal describes the multiple ways we combine various communicative modes in everyday life. (Arola 1)

Therefore, by incorporating several modalities into one cohesive class period, students are able to obtain information through multiple media. So, not only do instructors utilize a particular mode of communication, but also pair it with another to successfully articulate and relay important information. Before integrating multimodal practice into the classroom, instructors first have to learn

and understand what different learning styles are defined as, as well as which type of categories these learning styles are a part of today.

One way to look at learning styles is by using the VARK inventory. The VARK inventory was created by Neil Fleming and Charles C. Bonwell as a means for defining and organizing different learning styles. According to Fleming, “the acronym VARK stands for Visual, Aural, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic sensory modalities that are used for learning information” (Fleming). Combined, the VARK inventory is a multimodal approach to integrating several learning styles into one systematic methodology. Looking at each facet separately, Fleming fleshes out the assumptions and inaccuracies surrounding each mode of learning and approaches to better suit a person’s needs.

According to Fleming, individuals with a Visual learning style prefer the “depiction of information in maps, spider diagrams, charts, graphs, flow charts, labeled diagrams, and all the symbolic arrows, circles, hierarchies and other devices that people use to represent what could have been presented in words” (Fleming). In other words, visual learners prefer information to be presented in a way that allows the brain to place a “spot” for information along some type of systematic relevance.

Fleming also notes that the visual learning does not normally refer to mere images alone, stating “it does not include still pictures or photographs of reality,

movies, videos or PowerPoint. It does include designs, whitespace, patterns, shapes and the different formats that are used to highlight and convey information” (Fleming). By using a visual representation of important information, not as a substitute for written word, but as an aid, such as providing the lecture information on a projector or written on a chalkboard so students can follow along visually, instructors can better aid to a student population that excels through a visual mode of learning.

The Aural mode of learning is perhaps the most common and understood mode of learning within the humanities that encompass the liberal arts curriculum. According to Fleming, “learners who have this as their main preference report that they learn best from lectures, group discussion, radio, email, using mobile phones, speaking, web-chat and talking things through” (Fleming). This mode of communication through speech is a common mode of learning for a composition classroom, as well as across disciplines seen in many universities.

Traditional “lecture halls” and study groups would be categorized as benefitting students who learn through aural stimuli. Students who learn best through aural learning like to *hear* themselves understand a direction or rephrase a question. For aural learners, talking through information is key. Because much of the composition classroom is based heavily around discussion, the individuals

with aural learning styles benefit greatly from participating in discussion to help flesh out and work out difficult ideas and concepts.

The Read/Write mode of learning is commonly preferred by individuals who enjoy writing and using words to express their understanding and clarity on a particular issue or concept. Fleming notes that “people who prefer this modality are often addicted to PowerPoint, the Internet, lists, diaries, dictionaries, thesauri, quotations and words” (Fleming). This mode of learning is especially relevant and prominent in teaching composition because assessment done by instructors relies heavily on essays and written forms of communication to articulate and convey information. As noted by Fleming, people who feel drawn to expressing themselves through written word benefit strongly from being exposed to literature or digital communicative media such as online journals, blogs, etc. Due to the nature of composition courses, this style of learning is emphasized more frequently than other learning styles.

The final learning style that accounts of the “K” in the VARK acronym is called Kinesthetic, which refers to a mode of learning that relies on lived experience and the real world application. People who prefer a kinesthetic learning style often rely on real life simulations and experiences to help them understand new information. Fleming notes that, “it includes demonstrations, simulations, videos and movies of "real" things, as well as case studies, practice

and applications. The key is the reality or concrete nature of the example. If it can be grasped, held, tasted, or felt it will probably be included" (Fleming). Tangible, concrete objects or experiences are what kinesthetic learners thrive off of in the classroom.

Using an object that can be touched or related to an experience to help with a writing exercise can be a nice pair with merging learning styles to help cater to a diverse audience. People who thrive off of kinesthetic learning need to have an application or an understanding of the new information's context and to know where it fits into relevance. The phrase "connecting the dots" is appropriate when describing a kinesthetic learning individual because they need to place the new information with information and experience that learners already understand and are familiar with. An example of an activity utilizing this learning style would be to ask students to relate a topic to their own lives and write about it in a particular writing genre such as narrative or persuasive, which calls upon their need for their association to a real life situation as well as the link to what they already know to what is unfamiliar.

When applying these different modes of learning and considering how they fit into the classroom, the term "multimodal" has often been confused with "multimedia". Though the two concepts appear similar, they are both very different theories. Claire Lauer, author of the article titled, "Contending with

Terms: 'Multimodal' and 'Multimedia' in the Academic and Public Spheres"

states that, "modes and media are independent of and interdependent with each other, meaning that although media and modes are different from each other, the media we use affect the ways in which we can realize meaning through various modes" (Lauer 227). To define the two separately, "multimodal is characterized by the mixed logics brought together through the combination of modes (such as images, text, color, etc.-)" (Lauer 227). Contrarily, multimedia refers to, "the integration of two or more communications media. It's the use of text and sounds, plus still and moving pictures, to convey ideas, sell products, educate, and/or entertain" (Lauer 228). Though similar, Lauer argues that the terms are thought of as too interchangeable, and as a result they are losing their validity and meaning. This can be seen in her statement pertaining to the terms "multimodal" and "multimedia" and the understanding of their definitions:

In the context of the field of rhetoric and composition, these terms are not only defined similarly, they are often used interchangeably. Considering the relative newness, in composition, of expanding our notions of text and the technologies we use to compose texts, using terms interchangeably reveals how little consensus there seems to be on what these terms should be used to describe. (Lauer 229)



When thinking about the term “multimodal”, and what it describes, R. Steinmetz author of *Multimedia Technologie*, states that, “both *multimedia* and *multimodal* systems use multiple communication channels. However, in addition, a multimodal system is able to automatically model the content of the information at a high level of abstraction. A multimodal system strives for meaning” (Steinmetz 52). Conversely, multimedia focuses on a “medium or technology rather than the application or user” (Steinmetz 54). When thinking pedagogically about the two, multimedia is used to bring about multimodality and a utility to be taken advantage of while multimodal considers the relevance and purpose of using different modes and learning styles.

Combining the different learning styles into a cohesive presentation of information in a composition classroom benefits students who learn differently than the traditional lecture approach. With the rise of technology as a primary medium for conveying information, using a multimodal approach to teaching composition can help enhance students grasp on how to utilize technology. According to Brittany Barr, author of “Digital Life Place Narratives: integrating multimodal assignments into the writing curriculum,” multimodal composition is a great segue to familiarizing students with technology. Barr states that “multimodal assignments can help our students develop visual and digital literacy, which is key in a world where new technologies are constantly

emerging” (Barr 3). In an ever growing technological world and classroom, exposing students to technology and how to effectively utilize it for communication can help prepare them for higher education and occupations later on in life. Cindy Selfe, co-author with Richard Selfe of the article titled, “Convince Me: Valuing Multimodal Literacies and Composing Public Service Announcements (PSA’s)” argues that multimodal learning is seen in the K-12 classrooms; however, higher education is where the emphasis needs to take place. We see this in the following statement:

Teachers and scholars have begun to recognize what elementary teachers have known for years: that students learn best when they read and compose in multiple ways, when they use multimodalities to identify new and effective forms of literacy (podcasts, digital video, audio essays. (Selfe & Selfe 84)

In reflecting upon our prior education during the days of elementary school, learning extended far beyond the mere task of reading a work of literature. We painted our interpretations of the text, we performed plays, we created posters, and we sang songs. As children we employed more of a multimodal approach to learning than many of our college courses. With the ever evolving and expanding rise of technology, Selfe & Selfe stress the relevance of utilizing a multimodal approach arguing, “teachers need to pay some attention to

multimodal communications because this and future generations will undoubtedly use such exchanges to learn, remember, think, and act in the world” (Selfe & Selfe 85). Whether it is Facebook, Twitter, blogs, or other modes of technology, these forms of communication continue to influence students and have become primary modes of communication. As both Lauer and Steinmetz note, it is important to remember the distinction between multimedia and multimodal. Simply using multiple media to convey information does not aim to achieve what multimodality strives to accomplish. If instructors can utilize these technologies that students are familiar with, they can be transformed into educational multimodal tools to help students better understand information in the classroom.

Another argument Selfe & Selfe make for the integration of multimodal learning in the classroom is to better prepare our students for the changes in the workplace as well as the ever changing literacy demands (85). Due to the increased dependency upon technology as a necessary means of communication in today’s world, teachers’ mastery of multimodal communication is essential:

Employees must be educated deeply and widely, and prepared to function effectively and critically in digital and transnational communication environments. They must also be able and willing to work across conventional linguistic and geopolitical borders, to compose not

only with words, but also with still and moving images, sound and music, animation and multimedia texts. (Selfe & Selfe 86)

By introducing students to information through a multimodal lens, educators can better prepare them for the world beyond the composition classroom.

Through multimodal assignments as previously explained by Barr, students can also take what they have learned and articulate their understanding through a multimodal form of communication. Selfe & Selfe applies this need to integrate multimodal discourse into the classroom by quoting *A Global Imperative*, stating the following:

Twenty-first century literacy is the set of abilities and skills where aural, visual, and digital literacies overlap. These include the ability to understand the power of images and sounds, to recognize and use that power, to manipulate and transform digital media, to distribute them pervasively, and to easily adapt them to new forms. (Selfe & Selfe 83)

Twenty-first century literacy expands beyond the traditional pen-and-paper 500-word essays to portray an adequate understanding of material. By understanding that people learn differently, instructors can integrate altered modes of learning to meet student' different learning styles. Whether the portrayal of information is presented through a multimodal approach, or assignments done by students are multimodal projects which use two or more

modes of learning to effectively articulate their understanding of a concept, teachers need to make modifications in the classroom to better suit their students' diverse learning needs.

## Practicing Multimodality in Current Composition Classrooms

After discussing what the term multimodal entails and why it needs to be integrated into composition classrooms, it is important to look at what is being done currently. Many scholars and pioneers in the field of composition are already utilizing multimodal practice into their composition classrooms to enhance and reinforce the significance of multimodal pedagogy. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the 21st century definition of literacy has recently been revised as of February 15th, 2013 to include the following:

- Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts;
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments (“The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies”)

It is vital to integrate this kind of technology and literacy into the classroom to better adhere to the demands of technology the current generation is required to master. The first objective of the NCTE position statement discusses the pressing need for mastery of technology, as well as the fifth objective which calls for the

close critique and evaluation of multimedia text. By failing to introduce such media in the classroom, according to the NCTE, students do not possess a literacy for “cultural and communicative practices”. Thus, educators in composition courses need to take the initiative to integrate multimodal practice into their courses. In an article titled “Integrating Multimodal Composition into Classroom Practice” within the multimodal teaching resource of *Scholar*, an unnamed author argues that it is imperative to adapt to the 21st century way of life, stating:

Outside of school, students are composing in non-print (or multi) media that include combinations of video, graphics, text, and sound; all of which are frequently written and read in a nonlinear fashion. However, in school, students are rarely asked to utilize these same non-linear and multimedia forms of communication. Students need to develop 21st century literacies for their ongoing education and future careers, and these literacies include multimedia literacy.

With the requirement to teach students how to be proficient in multimedia literacy, some scholars have already implemented multimodal resources into their classroom to help meet these requirements outlined by the NCTE. The first scholar to really recognize the need to integrate and practice multimodal pedagogy into the composition classroom was Cindy Selfe of Ohio State

University. Selfe has been described as the “pioneer in digital technologies in composition and rhetoric” (Bailie). According to Brian Bailie, in an interview with Cindy Selfe, titled “If You Don’t Believe that You’re Doing Some Good with the Work that You Do, then You Shouldn’t Be Doing It”, Bailie notes that “Selfe is the first woman and the first English studies teacher ever to receive the EDUCOM Medal for innovative computer use in higher education” (Bailie). As a pioneer in the field of computers and writing, Selfe has pushed for the integration of technology in the composition classroom for well over two decades. During her interview, Selfe talks extensively about the need for communication, and how technology helps people collaborate and communicate, bridging the gap brought by geographical distance, and promotes a sense of “community” between educators and students:

If we didn’t have those extended networks, we couldn’t do those projects. And the only way we can maintain these extended networks is by knowing how to live and exist in a cloud that allows us to reach out to people. On the one hand, it has everything to do with the technology that makes so many people accessible; on the other hand, it has to do with shaping of our understanding of what collaborative work is. (Bailie)

Although Selfe discusses that technology is a great tool for collaborating and extending a more “communicative” basis for education that extends beyond the



realm of a physical classroom or department, Selfe notes that this notion of embracing technology is still running into much resistance among her colleagues. Many fear that inability to master technology directly results in lack of technological incorporation in the classroom. Selfe explains to Bailie how the resistance of technology by educators is still a remaining problem in today's society in the following statement:

I see a lot of fear in English departments. People think they're too old to take on the task of learning technologies, and they are stymied by the realization that they will never master technology, that they'll never get to where they're comfortable with it because they recognize the pace of technological change is so fast that they don't have enough time in the day to become expert at it, and they don't see how they could teach it without becoming expert at it. So, that's the humanist camp: we are more sophisticated about technology than we were twenty years ago, but we're nonetheless resistant to seeing technological or digital texts as "serious" texts or even resistant to seeing multimodal composition as even "real" composition. (Bailie)

Because Selfe recognizes this resistance, she motivates and encourages her colleagues to learn rather than give up. Selfe is perhaps the greatest inspiration to and motivator of educators in the field of composition to embrace and value

multimodal pedagogy and technology. Selfe & Takayoshi's book titled, *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers* offers a collection of chapters by educators in the field of composition that guide educators in integrating multimodal practice into the composition classroom. Selfe recognizes the need for direction and motivation when it comes to pushing for a different approach that embraces the resources in today's society. According to the NCTE, the "traditional" teaching approach needs to be paired with communicative tools of the 21st century ("The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies"). By creating the foundation for a field so intricate and new, Selfe has mentored many educators in the field of composition, changing and influencing the push toward a more multimodal approach in the composition classroom. Many scholars in the field of composition are embracing Selfe's practices and teaching philosophies into their own classroom, relying on multimodal pedagogy to teach composition and collaborative learning more successfully.

Mentored by Selfe, Dr. Kristin Arola of Washington State University composes composition textbooks that are available online for students to interactively engage in the text and the world of composition. Within Dr. Arola's classroom, students are required to complete multimodal projects, which aim to push them to utilize different media of technologies. Dr. Arola's first chapter entitled, "What are Multimodal Projects?" is an eBook that breaks down the

facets of multimodal projects, as well as explains different multimodal approaches. According to Dr. Arola the expectation of what a reader is able to get out of a text changes as multimodal approaches are taken to enhance the presentation of text:

Whether at school, on the job, or just in everyday life, multimodal texts have become an essential part of communication practices in nearly every arena of contemporary culture. The widespread use of design and media software, Web 2.0 technologies, and other digital media has increased opportunities to convey information and has also changed the expectations of readers. (Arola 2)

Even so, some educators resist having to “create” new multimodal projects, without remembering how integrated these modes are within society already. With these new literacies and expectations in digital communications, instructors fear their ability to teach students through a multimodal lens in an ever changing technological society. How do educators keep up with what is constantly evolving and adapting to meet societal needs?

In his chapter of the text *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, titled “Experimenting with Multimodality,” John Branscum addresses this fear that Selfe recognizes so consciously stating, “Teachers and students can sometimes forget why intellectual experimentation is so engaging; how creative

work can feel so satisfying, even when it is hard; and how flexible we all need to be about learning new styles” (Branscum 83). This flexibility comes with the understanding that adaptation as well as innovation is all part of the multimodal process. Branscum states that the benefits of experimentation are important because “teachers can help students discover the generative power of making meaning” (83). Extracting meaning out of constructing a multimodal assignment is one of the main goals of multimodality. Questions such as “why did I choose red for my PowerPoint font?” or “Why have I chosen to incorporate a song into my presentation?” all adhere to multimodal discourse, as they help students not only learn about how the choices they make, but also how their presentation enhances their understanding of composition and the material they are trying to master. The integration of multimodal assignments can help students demonstrate their understanding of written text more effectively, through a mode of learning that they feel accurately depicts their display of knowledge.

Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her article titled, “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” discusses the current shift from a sole dependency on written text to propel composition courses, but rather, to utilize technology to encompass text as well as other multimodal practice to better meet to student needs. In her article, Yancey discusses Gail Hawisher, a close collaborator with Selfe, and a Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Illinois, who calls

for the need to transcend technology beyond a mere “professional development tool” for instructors, but rather, something introduced in the classroom which promotes “student access” (Yancey 304). Hawisher notes that without realizing it, many instructors “have already committed to a theory of communication that is both/and: print and digital” (Yancey 304). Course management systems such as Moodle and Blackboard allow students to utilize their face-to-face classrooms through a virtual classroom portal. Through these course management systems, text transforms from a print source to hyperlinks that lead students into PDF’s and other realms of the internet like blogs and forums relevant to their courses. Workshops as well as journals can take digital form, and students are able to communicate with one another from opposite ends of the country, which adheres to promoting a “digital classroom community” without the face-to-face environment.

Northern Michigan University (NMU), located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, is a university that prides itself on being an institution that values and encourages utilizing and mastering the educational benefits of technology, and, as such, adapts and challenges itself to incorporate newer technologies into practice. Like Dr. Arola, many professors at NMU offer text through a multimodal lens. They teach in hybrid classrooms equipped with projector plug-ins for laptops as well as computers for all full-time students loaded with

software like PowerPoint and Windows Movie Maker, both multimedia tools that can be utilized in the composition classroom.

At NMU, undergraduates and graduates are able to take composition courses entirely online which require visual and auditory projects that are used to encompass written text. Rather than meet with professors face to face, Skype and webcams are now being used as alternatives to the real world classroom exchanges. Instructors, whether entirely online or in a hybrid classroom, are introducing these new technologies to their students, encouraging and stressing their relevance and purpose in composition classrooms.

In her Advanced Writing Theory graduate course at Northern Michigan University, Dr. Elizabeth Monske requires her students to compose an online course from the role of an instructor. Students are asked to explore a different multimodal medium that is unfamiliar to them prior to the course, then present to the class and explain how students could utilize the software to compose assignments or perform some facet of the course that correlates with their writing. Whether it is a blog or a forum that students can converse or use for workshop, multimodal composition is the main focus of Dr. Monske's graduate course. Graduate students who teach freshmen composition can use these multimodal applications in their own classrooms and as a result can develop

multimodal pedagogy practices to promote students' familiarity with technology and its significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The same holds true for composition instructors at Michigan State University, where Dànielle DeVoss, professor of Professional Writing at MSU, discusses the transition towards a more multimodal approach to composition. In an interview with Meghan Spork, through a Michigan State University interview program "Faculty Conversations," DeVoss relates that "more and more, we're having students write not just with words, but with images, with transitions, with movement, with sound – and sometimes they use the sound and images of others". Many instructors are beginning to recognize that text and the world of composition extends much further than written word and individual writing and extends to collaborative production and cultural connections.

Another main objective argued by the NCTE as being an essential part of 21st century literacy is to "build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought" ("The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies"). Returning to "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key," Yancey addresses the need for multimodal and media integration into composition classrooms in order to effectively foster those cross-cultural connections through collaboration and critical thinking. Yancey notes the

composition classroom emphasis on a “primary and single human relationship: the writer in relation to the teacher” (309). As a result of this relationship, the student has no contact with his or her peers; rather the attention is more focused on the relationship of the individual and the instructor. Yancey argues that under this model “the classroom writer is not a member of a collaborative group with a common project linked to the world at large and delivered in multiple genres and media, but a singular person writing over and over again—to the teacher” (310). Under this model, teachers are not effectively adhering to the literacies outlined by the NCTE, which ultimately results in the instructor failing to prepare the student for communicative practice beyond the composition classroom.

Though much has been done in the field of composition towards a more integrative multimodal and technological approach to teaching composition, many argue that there is still a dire need to adapt the traditional classroom to better serve the literacies expected of students within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Selfe advocates embracing change in the composition classroom and encouraging instructors to utilize and respond to student’s technology based society in order to make them literate in the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The NCTE believes that the incorporation of collaboration, technology, and analysis are essential proficiencies college students should be able to master.



Arola, DeVoss, Monske, Hawisher, Branscum, and Yancey are all educators influenced by Selfe. These six educators accept the responsibility for making students proficient in the literacies outlined by the NCTE. To meet those expectations, they have adapted their composition classrooms and curricula to best serve their students. Course management systems as well as collaborative multimodal projects can help students utilize and master the technologies society expects them to understand. As Yancey argues, the rise of technology to transition from the “teacher-student” relationship towards a more dynamic transformation that still relies on that dynamic, but transcends toward a more collaborative multimodal framework (306). Many theorists and composition faculty recognize this urge to push toward a more competent and proficient multimodal classroom, adapting lessons to assist all learning styles and fostering a collaborative environment.

## Teaching Introductory Literature Courses

Though educators and theorists recognize the need for multimodal discourse within the field of composition, what multimodal pedagogy can do for communication purposes in the field of composition has not yet been fully realized in the field of literature. However, there is common ground. Much of the writing technique and discourse students obtain through introductory composition courses is utilized in the introductory literature courses. Gunther Kress, author of the article titled, "Reading Images: Multimodality, Representation and New Media" discusses the relevance of traditional literature and text and its purpose:

Writing as mode and book as medium have shaped western imagination, forms of knowledge, practices of reading; the technology of writing has shaped the book, and the technology of the book has shaped how writing has developed. The traditional book represented the work of the author, who had labored to produce a text, which in its ordering represented a 'body of knowledge' or the shape of the world – whether fictional or actual. (Kress)

While the book has been widely known to “represent a body of knowledge,” Kress argues that as a result the purpose of its reader and scholars was to “attempt to follow the pre-given ordering of the written text, embodying the authority of the author, working assiduously to reproduce the meaning which the author had intended for the reader” (Kress). Literature courses focused on critically analyzing text encompasses much of what composition instructors strive to engrain in their students. However, in a real world scope, literature easily adapts to the multimodal audience, offering auditory, theatre, and film versions of the literary classics; many classrooms teachers on the other hand, are bound to traditional means for understanding text.

So why aren't educators seeing a substantial multimodal push into introductory literature classrooms? Mary F. Wright, author of the article titled, “Multimodal Trans(ACT)ions With Literature through the Creation of a Zine” argues that many teachers simply aren't incorporating multimodal pedagogy because they don't have an adept understanding of what it is. According to Wright:

Teacher educators often lag behind the changing times, clinging to the tried and true within their methods courses. Lack of daily contact with contemporary adolescence, or “millennials” keeps teacher educators out

of touch with the ever-changing world of adolescents and their increasingly new modes of expressing thought and communicating with one another (Wright 93-94).

With this generation gap, teachers feel as though they're "lagging behind" on the technology wave that the current generation has learned to surf. This chapter presents successful multimodal practice used in composition courses, as well as offers multimodal composition resources that can be integrated into introductory literature courses. Further, it offers some proven multimodal approaches to teaching introductory literature at the college level.

Wright believes there is a deep connection between teaching literature and multimodal practice. Within her classroom at University of Minnesota- Duluth, Wright explains that she has seen success with multimodal practice in her literature courses; "I have long been an advocate of arts-based literacy practices, utilizing the talents and proclivities of my students to motivate, enlighten, and heighten engagement with literature" (93). As a result, Wright incorporates a multimodal unit with each major work of literature that she teaches in her introductory literature course. If Wright covers *Hamlet*, she will then assign her class the responsibility of "acting out" a scene from the play. This interpretation of what the text means requires students to depict their understanding accurately

in a presentation to the class. Wright believes there is a deep connection with the arts and literature. As a result, she strives to join the two, calling upon “physical, cognitive and affective transactions with literature” (93). By asking students to act out a play during a unit on Shakespeare, or create a soundtrack to accompany a work of literature such as *The Great Gatsby*, multimodal practice is slipped in, smoothly and unobtrusively. By allowing students to rely on the arts as a means for expressing themselves, Wright believes that teachers should “whenever possible, utilize the use of music, visual arts, drama, creative writing, and videography expand our current notions of literacy to one more fit to prepare our students to interact in an ever-changing world” (93). By relying on technologies of the generation and allowing students to personally identify with works of literature through media they connect to, the students are able to really “live” the literature and identify with it in a way that personally adheres to their learning styles and modes of self-expression, while also utilizing technology to better prepare them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Integrating technologies that students are already familiar with can help students connect to the classroom. Video sites such as YouTube provide access to lectures, presentations, and other scholarly academic visual stimuli that can enhance literature and make it come alive. Yvonne Ho, author of the article titled, “Ten Fun Ways to Use YouTube Videos in an Online Literature Class”

discusses her success with integrating YouTube in her online classroom to help teach literature:

I started exploring YouTube and found many different kinds of videos that I could use to supplement my online literature classes. Student feedback has been very positive as they love hearing about the author's take on why they wrote their latest work. I've also found that students are now more interested in literature since it has become more fun and entertaining through the use of multimedia.

By utilizing YouTube in a literature course, students are not only learning through visual stimuli but also from auditory stimuli as well. Ho explains that she uses YouTube as an accompaniment to an assignment, which requires her students to utilize YouTube, or as a mere aid to lecture, assisting in providing visual or auditory stimuli to help teach literature. Also, in an online classroom, providing YouTube video links gives students the opportunity to revisit the video, providing multiple exposures to information that they might not be able to retain in a traditional classroom lecture. Like Yancey, Ho advocates for a classroom that promotes student access. Integrating YouTube in the classroom is an effective strategy because it provides a medium that students are also able to view at home as well as in the classroom. Ho believes that by getting students

more connected to the text, students are more likely to participate in discussion, and to connect on a more personal level in their own writing and responses to works of literature. In her article, Ho also offers ten tips to successfully integrate YouTube into the online literature classroom based on the success she has seen in her classroom.

However, much of the advice offered by Selfe, Yancey, Ho, and others can be integrated into the face-to-face classroom and is not limited to the online realm. With a classroom equipped with technological resources such as a projector and internet access, teachers can hook up their computers to the projector and stream YouTube videos for their students to view collectively, rather than viewing them individually at home. Not only does this approach foster an environment for collective discussion as Selfe stresses in her interview with Brian Bailie discussed previously, but it also offers an environment that can facilitate questionings and help students understand facets of the video that may have been confusing or troubling. Selfe and Ho both agree that utilizing extended networks to foster collaborative learning environments, such as using a YouTube video created by students from another institution, can be an excellent addition to classroom instruction. In her article, Ho also offers suggestions for easy multimodal assistance in the classroom such as watching a YouTube video

performance of a poem, and viewing segments of plays for analysis to see if the video interpretation is as effective as the written text.

Additionally, Ho advises instructors to show their literature classrooms YouTube videos that contain literary analysis done by well-known scholars on works that the class is currently reading and analyzing. Not only does this approach show effective modeling in the classroom, but it also gives students the opportunity to be introduced to well-known scholars in the field of literature as well as different ways to critically think about text. YouTube videos are an effective resource for literature teachers because different videos can emphasize showcase elements present in a literary work. Aside from the visual stimuli associated with videos, the auditory element present can help emphasize portions of a text or help students think critically about text. Ho notes the auditory advantage of utilizing YouTube in her classroom when teaching Dante's *Inferno*. In her article, Ho notes that she "found a YouTube video of Dante's *Inferno* in its original language, Italian. Listening in Italian helps the students get an idea of how the poem sounds in its native language" (Ho). Hearing a work spoken in the way it was intended to be read can be a tremendous benefit to students because it can make the text come alive.



Dr. Sandra Burr of Northern Michigan University (NMU), an Associate Professor in the department of English, also integrates multimodal projects into her literature courses. According to Dr. Burr, “we live in a world of abstract” (Personal Interview). Under this framework, Dr. Burr believes that providing a multimodal assignment that gets students to show their understanding of literature through a medium they feel comfortable with is the best way to connect students to literature. According to Dr. Burr, “Integrating a multimodal assignment into American Literature courses allows students to use different parts of their brain” (Personal Interview). By doing so, Dr. Burr believes she is accommodating different learning styles present within the classroom, such as those highlighted in the VARK inventory invented by Fleming. Dr. Burr assigns her students a multimodal project at the end of every semester, as an alternative to a comprehensive research paper. Students are able to approach the assignment in the way they wish, as long as it is approved by Dr. Burr. For students who don’t feel comfortable with the freedom of the assignment, Dr. Burr also allows the traditional twelve to fifteen page research paper.

However, Dr. Burr has found that most students choose to construct their own projects based on their understanding of the text. She notes that she has seen projects ranging from “song performed, to paintings depicting a particular time period or literary theme” (Personal Interview). To accompany the

assignment, Dr. Burr requires her students to write a five to six page process paper explaining what choices they made, how their project connects to the course, and how their understandings of content have been impacted, saying:

The process paper is really my opportunity to get to know my students. What drives them? Who are they? It's about knowing their learning process and seeing why they've made certain choices. It promotes metacognition and allows them to learn something that was meaningful to them. (Personal Interview)

Dr. Burr has been using multimodal assignments as an accompaniment to her literature courses for several years. She notes that she has never run into a student who has "opposed" the assignment and that if anything, students seem to genuinely appreciate and get excited about it (Personal Interview). Like Ho, Wright, and Yancey, Dr. Burr believes in the success generated in incorporating multimodal assignments into the literature classroom.

Internationally, both composition and literature instructors are seeing the essential need for multimodal discourse to teaching literature and composition successfully. By using popular television and media as a segue to help correlate literature and analysis with what students already know, students, who may not be as familiar with international references, are able to draw connections with the

text. Shanthini Pillai, author of the article titled, "Popular Pedagogy: Multimodal Environments for the Teaching and Learning of Literature in the Malaysian Tertiary World" discusses the relevance of multimodal pedagogy and its connections with literature in teaching ESL students abroad. In her article, Pillai discusses the inter-related connectivity composition and literature have by utilizing multimodal text:

Each element in the multimodal text is interlinked with the others present, each having a role to play in the whole process of communicating meaning. Hence the term ensemble, an arrangement of different modes of instruments of communication, all working in unison to produce a single *composition*. (Pillai 3)

By recognizing this need to connect composition and literature, Pillai utilizes multimodal pedagogy as a tool to help understand literature which then results of the production of a composition piece that is proficient in critically analyzing and understanding literature.

Not only does Pillai argue that multimodality is used as a tool to teach literature effectively, but she also offers the viewpoint that, "multimodality is not merely the utilization of different modes of texts and contexts for learning but rather the catalyst for communication and creativity" (3). Like Dr. Burr, Pillai

argues that creativity is what really connects students to the text within the classroom and allows them to identify personally to their work through their self-expression. Pillai notes, “this aspect opens up the whole platform for learning and the acquiring of literacies, as students are not hemmed in by the sole source of language” (3). By simulating what people already know and what is familiar through creative practice, instructors can help bridge the gap between articulating thought through composition as a primary source of assessment and presenting literary concepts and text by means of multimodal discourse.

While teachers such as Wright, Ho, Burr, and Pillai are recognizing the benefits to incorporating multiple modalities to enhance written text and assignments in the literature classroom, others are still hesitant to explore a realm that they are unfamiliar with. By incorporating what students are constantly exposed to and using it in the classroom, instructors will be better able to not only peak student interest but also adapt the students’ varied learning styles in order to individualize that best suits students’ personal needs and creativity.

## Applying Multimodal Pedagogy to Current T.A. Lesson Plans

Through composition resources, such as Selfe & Takayoshi's *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, literature teachers can modify multimodal suggestions and practice to adapt their curriculum and classrooms. The craft of writing is interdisciplinary. Because the fields of literature and composition are so interwoven, many multimodal resources found in both specialties can be modified to better suit each subject's needs.

In "Composing Multimodal Assignments" Mickey Hess helps teachers, "plan for and undertake assignments that can yield not only print essays, but also audio projects, and projects that combine the modalities of sounds, image, and word" (29). Hess argues that the first step towards integrating multimodal assignments in the classroom is to start with students. Students first need to re-evaluate their notion of what "composing" really means in the writing and literature classrooms. In reference to composing, Hess breaks down what the components of effective writing and creates assignments that require students demonstrate their learning in the classroom. This framework promotes personalization in student writing, says Hess, in that:

Effective composing assignments involve students in reflection about not only the processes, but also the products of composing...effective assignments count on the fact that each student contributes ideas and approaches, interests and perspectives, skills and understandings that change composing tasks and personalize composition. (29)

Effective composing relies heavily on the approach of the student. Hess believes that personalizing the approach towards composing has a huge impact on the final process. In order to achieve such personalization, students need to rely on skills and approaches that they not only feel most comfortable utilizing, but also that they personally identify with and have interest in.

Hess argues that “teachers who compose the best assignments... don’t outline a step-by-step procedure for students to follow; instead, they create assignments that prompt writers to think in new ways” (29). By providing less direction, students must construct *their* interpretation of the assignment as well as creative approaches that better fit their interests and levels of comfort. This lack of assignment structure is what Dr. Burr emphasized when explaining her multimodal projects in her literature courses. It is because of a less detailed assignment that Hess argues, “Assignments that are less directive may be more productive in that they can help students to develop their own perspectives and

theorize how they came to a particular composing approach and *why* it fits their project” (29). This notion of “thinking about *how* one creates” is a term labeled “metacognition”, i.e. an, “awareness or analysis of one's own learning or thinking processes” (Merriam-Webster). By utilizing metacognition, students can have a better understanding of their composing process, analyzing not only the final product, but also what they did in order to arrive at that final piece.

In order for metacognition to occur, Hess highlights three main elements necessary for teachers to orchestrate successful multimodal assignments. First, teachers must focus on the type of theory they would like to implement into their multimodal assignments. Hess notes “faculty need to think not only about *why* they want to integrate multimodal assignments into their classes, but also about *which* assignments are amenable to the affordances of different modalities” (30). What this means is that teachers need to think about what the multimodal assignment can do to enhance their unit or text to magnify and broaden student understanding of it.

Once the theory of the multimodal assignment is fleshed out, Hess encourages teachers to consider structure and choice. Because multimodal assignments provide such a plethora of approaches, Hess notes that the instructor’s job is then to “leave plenty of room for choices within a structure that

outlines the goals and objectives for student work” (30). This decision to still allow choice, but provide it within a realm of structure leaves most of the decision making up to the student. This personal decision making fosters metacognitive thinking which gets students thinking about their deliberate choices and approaches towards the assignment. Providing a flexible structure and extensive choice for students allows for a realm of originality that they can take advantage of to create personally relevant learning artifacts the instructor is asking them to produce.

Lastly, Hess encourages instructors to provide a sense of circulation within the course and unit the multimodal project focuses on. Hess discusses that this means the project should have meaning and deliberate purpose that transcends the assignment itself, stating:

Multimodal composing projects should *go* somewhere. They should have authentic audiences and purposes that extend beyond the walls of the classroom. When assignments are designed in this way, students and teachers will want to show their work outside the classroom. (30)

When we consider preparing students for the outside world and proficiency within the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the literacies it demands, multimodal projects in composition and literature challenge students to utilize mediums and



forms of communication that are seen both in and out of the classroom.

Knowledge and proficiency in how to master these modes will help students to better express themselves and as well as to complete in an ever-dependent technological society. Not only does it adhere to students' learning needs, but it also gives them an opportunity to present a form of communication that they identify with personally. Cynthia L. Selfe and Pamela Takayoshi, in, "Thinking about Multimodality" argues for the incorporation of multimodal pedagogy for not only educational benefit but also proficiency in multiple modalities as a tool that will help them in all aspects of life:

In an increasingly technological world, students need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading text employing multiple modalities, but also in *composing* in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successful within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, and geopolitical borders. (Selfe & Takayoshi 2)

This craft of proficiency in reading as well as composing multimodal bridges the gap between literature and composition where multimodal pedagogy is seen to enhance and personify both disciplines. While composition is embracing the

multimodal incorporation into its classrooms, many introductory literature instructors are still holding on to traditional critique and analysis of written text.

As an instructor, I take the definitions of 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy made by the NCTE very seriously. I believe that as educators, it is our responsibility to not only adhere to all of the objectives of the NCTE, but also strive to teach students how to “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia text” (“The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies”). As both Selfe and Hess have mentioned, this objective is met by the educational community with some resistance because instructors are failing to learn how to incorporate new technology into their curriculum and classroom. This troubling dilemma leaves students at a disadvantage when they leave the classroom and continue their journey which leads them to life after their education. Composition teaches students how to effectively communicate with the outside world, primarily through the medium of writing. Selfe has long emphasized, and others in the field of composition are beginning to recognize, that teaching students to become proficient in just the medium of writing prevents them from being proficient in all that the NCTE has outlined in its position statement defining 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy.

Fleming and Utts have proven that there are different types of learning styles. Some students learn visually, others thrive aurally; some learn through

reading and writing; others through kinesthetic experience. Multimodal practice encourages students to have the opportunity to not only learn from several different pedagogical approaches, but also have the opportunity to be creative in their communicative approaches. Therefore, Dr. Burr and others call upon students to utilize their preferred mode of learning, which will help enhance and engage their understanding in both the composition and the literature classroom.

As a graduate instructor at Northern Michigan University (NMU), my responsibility is to teach a freshmen composition course, EN 111. My students range from nursing majors to art and design majors. While my science students claim they learn by doing, my art majors tell me they find themselves most attentive when I am utilizing my projector and displaying visual information for them to follow along with as I teach. After considering what approaches I can take in my classroom, I attempt to accommodate multiple learning styles in one cohesive class period, I've constructed multimodal assignments that aid my students' different learning styles. What instructors need to remember is that these students are the same types of students we see in the literature classroom. We have the same technological resources and the same types of learning styles present in the composition classroom. As discussed earlier, the interdisciplinary nature of composition and literature are an interwoven road. Composition strategies are utilized in literature classrooms and similarly, literary technique

and analysis are introduced in composition classrooms. Because the two disciplines are so intertwined, much of what is taught through multimodal pedagogy in the composition classroom is applicable in the literature classroom as well.

As Branscum notes “teachers and students can sometimes forget why intellectual experimentation is so engaging; how creative work can feel so satisfying, even when it is hard; and how flexible we all need to be about learning new styles” (83). A way to approach Branscum’s idea can be found in what I have done in EN 111. The book we read throughout the semester, *A Mountain of Crumbs* by Elena Gorokhova is a memoir about a girl growing up in Soviet Russia. Students read the book throughout the semester and are then required to write a literary analysis on any facet of the memoir.

To help generate a topic, I ask my students to complete a “comic book” as well as a soundtrack to accompany the comic book. Not only does this assignment present both a visual and aural approach to the content of the text, but it also gives students the opportunity to approach the text creatively. The visual component of the assignment requires them to show some type of progression within the text. As long as students are conveying some aspect of the text chronologically, then they are able to choose a character, theme, symbol, etc.

For each song selection, students have to provide a detailed justification for why it is appropriate. This justification allows me, as the instructor, to judge whether or not they have an adequate understanding of the plot. As an example, I've provided assignment sheets for the two activities that I use with my composition students to teach literature (See Appendix A).

In the two semesters I've asked students to complete the assignment, I have seen enthusiasm as opposed to resistance as well as an increase in discussion and participation as opposed to students hesitant to share their work. To me, what matters most is their ability to connect to the assignment, drawing up their own personal interests, and generating their own depiction of their understanding of the text. In this way, students are able to have authorship to their work because it draws upon learning styles they feel most comfortable utilizing. Like Dr. Burr, I also believe that multimodal assignments "allow students to use different parts of their brain" (Personal Interview).

I have found that like Arola, utilizing e-books that pair with composition textbooks, have a strong effect on student engagement. By allowing students to use their laptops in the classroom, students are able to work interactively with their textbook through the e-book that Bedford St. Martin's offers in my students' *How to Write Anything* textbook. Each chapter offers activities as well as color

pairing with different concepts and words that students need to remember. For example, the narrative chapter offers a multimedia documentary by Katherine Cizek titled "Out my Window," which explores different apartments around the world, offering a 360 degree view that asks students to utilize their narrative voice to effectively describe and illustrate. Within the literature classroom, e-books are offered to accompany anthologies and other texts as well, which Ho and Yancey argue, enhance and increase student engagement.

Using YouTube as an agent to channel different presentations, music, and film has been a very effective tool to increase student engagement and offer a visual component in the classroom. Whether we are analyzing film or looking for author interviews, YouTube has been a very beneficial tool to promote multimodal pedagogy in the classroom. As Ho argues, many scholarly interviews as well as readings done in native language as some literary works intend, can help enhance discussion pertaining to a literary work in the classroom. Within the literature classroom, watching a film version of a novel can allow students to analyze the similarities and differences as well as discuss how the visual interpretations have differed from the ones they have created internally as they read. By viewing these tools as not just a means for a particular course, but as an interdisciplinary asset to enhancing both the literature and

composition classroom, teachers can see how effective and endless the possibilities of teaching with multimodal resources can be.

Lastly, I have found it very important to encourage metacognition in the classroom. When students are composing multimodal projects or assignments, I believe it is important to get them to think about the choices they are making. The question “why” is frequently asked in my classroom, challenging students to reflect upon the decisions they are making. Not only does this approach allow them to personalize their writing and their projects, but it also gets them to fully understand the material and the assignment, as argued by Hess. Hess contends that “effective composing assignments involve students in reflection about not only the processes, but the products of composing” (59). In asking students to reflect during the composing process, students then have a better understanding of what the final piece will really be demonstrating, rather than asking them to reflect on the project after its already been submitted. This is why the “justification” portion of the assignment I described matters so much in assessing students who complete multimodal assignments. By encouraging metacognition, students are able to explain to the teacher why they made the choices they did which helps illustrate their understanding of the content of the course.

Though the field is relatively new, multimodal composition is a sub-field of composition that recognizes the need for the integration of technology to not only reach diverse learning styles, but also to produce proficient students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century definitions of literacy. Cindy Selfe, has begun to create the ripples within the discipline of composition, inspiring scholars such as Arola and DeVoss.. Through her publications, Selfe has tried to provide resources for instructors that are resistant to embrace multimodal composition and technology in the classroom. Of the resources aimed at composition classrooms, they also transfer into literature, offering a technological and multimodal approach towards analysis and critique of written works. By offering multimodal projects and assignments, scholars like Hess and Burr argue that students are more “aware” of the process of creating, reflecting upon the decisions they make and the product they are producing.

Increasing student engagement and providing students with the tools of technology to better prepare them for the outside world can be done effectively through the utilization of multimodal pedagogy. Multimodal pedagogy bridges the gap between composition and literature and treats the two disciplines as an interwoven road frequently crossed. As educators, it is our responsibility to adhere to the shift in literacies and to provide our students with an education



that will not only allow for their full engagement in the classroom, but also will prepare them for life outside of the academic walls.

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## Appendix A

### "THE COMIC"

*A Mountain of Crumbs* by Elena Gorokhova

Directions: Draw a theme or character that you see progressing throughout the novel, the plot points that you choose to convey in your comics should be in a chronological order, according to the way the story moves. You can incorporate color, magazine clippings, or whatever you feel helps creatively express *your understanding* of our text.


## “THE SOUNDTRACK”

Please choose a song for each of the window panes you’ve decided to include in your comic. The song should make sense and accompany the drawing for a reason. After you’ve listed the song, I’d like you to write a justification statement for the song, and why you believe it makes sense to place it in that particular scene of your comic. As long as you can defend why you think it fits, then I’ll allow any music genre.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Justification:

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Justification:

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Justification:

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Justification: