



## **Attuning Multilingual Students to Multimodal Contexts through Rhetorical Analysis of Multimodal Texts**

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**Abstract:** Multilingual writers combine an array of unique perspectives and experiences with the English language that relate to their development of rhetorical sensibility in the composition classroom. Including multimodality in the composition classroom provides an opportunity to cultivate what Rebecca Lorimer Leonard (2014) called rhetorical attunement through student engagement with new kinds of texts. Thus, students can be better attuned to writing across situated contexts as well as languages through multimodality. I propose a teaching artifact used in my first-year, multilingual composition classroom. The design of this multimodal exercise develops from notions of rhetorical attunement that Leonard observed in the writing of multilingual students. As students encounter new kinds of texts in their developing research processes later on, this practice in multimodality responds to a challenging aspect of the research genre by helping students attune to contexts and rhetorical situatedness of other kinds of texts that may otherwise seem unfamiliar or unapproachable.

**Keywords:** multilingual writing, multimodality, rhetorical attunement

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**Teaching Artifact: Attuning Multilingual Students to Multimodal Contexts through Rhetorical Analysis of Multimodal Texts**

Multilingual students encounter several challenges in their first-year writing courses. Purely text-based readings can sometimes serve as a barrier of entry to multilingual students, taxing language abilities and leading to frustration. While text-based readings are an absolutely integral part of the first-year composition classroom, engagement with multimodal texts provides additional context for multilingual students to practice their rhetorical awareness and analytical skills. Incorporating multimodal texts as objects of analysis encourages multilingual students to practice what Rebecca Lorimer Leonard (2014) called “rhetorical attunement.” This concept “highlights the rhetorical in multilingualism: its instability and contingency, its political weight and contextual embeddedness. In fact, calling attunement rhetorical serves to underline these elements—materiality, contingency, emergence, resistance” (p. 230). In other words, rhetorical attunement results from a habitus developed through play across languages, genres, and contexts. Furthermore, a focus on rhetorical attunement allows students to use their own sense of language to build an understanding of the rhetorical moves at play in any given situation (Leonard, 2014). Leonard used this concept to trace students’ rhetorical sense in writing, and I am extending it here to theorize a discussion activity used to introduce first-year multilingual students to multimodality. Including a focus on the rhetorical functions of multimodal texts in the composition classroom provides a unique opportunity to cultivate a sharper sense of rhetorical attunement with attention to the “elements” that Leonard provided in her conceptualization.

This teaching artifact is designed to introduce the concept of multimodality through an analysis of the rhetorical features of a series of related multimodal texts. This activity is incorporated into a first-year composition course that is primarily designated for multilingual students at a large midwestern university. The course meets three days a week for fifty minutes a class period on the semester schedule. In terms of curriculum, the course consists of four units including a textual analysis unit focused on the close study of a single essay read during the first few weeks of class, a multimodal analysis unit focused on learning how to bring critical analysis skills to multiple kinds of texts, a research unit geared toward introducing students to basic academic research, and a revision and reflection unit in which students reflect on the practice of revising their earlier work. The course is capped at fifteen students who are predominately international and arrive with a wide range of backgrounds, native languages, experiences, and competencies in English. As a result, the environment of the class provides “[t]he conditions that foster rhetorical attunement [which] are those in which multiplicity is a norm and difference is inevitable” (Leonard, 2014, p. 240). These classroom conditions allow for the analyses of various texts, contexts, languages, writing habits, and the

rhetorical nature of composition. The multimodal unit of the course in particular provides an excellent opportunity to cultivate rhetorical attunement through engagement with multimodal texts. By the time we begin this unit in the course, students have already written a critical analysis essay in which they examine the specific writing strategies and rhetorical moves used by the author(s) of a given course reading. This assignment helps students practice building analytical skills that they continue to refine for the remainder of the course. With some initial exposure to analytical reading and writing, students move into the multimodal unit prepared to work with a new kind of text.

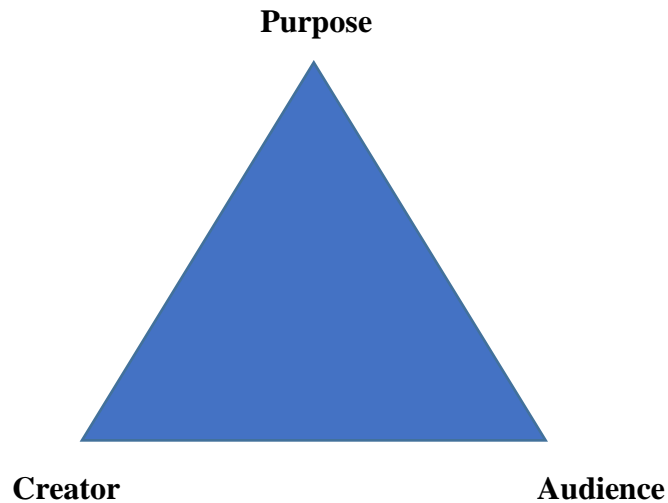
In aiming to cultivate a heightened awareness of rhetorical attunement, I offer two pedagogical strategies used to introduce multimodality. The first is the description of a discussion technique used during class time in order to introduce students to analyzing multimodal texts. In this activity, students view a series of three multimodal advertisements created by Apple. Then, students discuss with each other about these advertisements based on the following questions: what do you notice about this advertisement? How does this advertisement work? Why does this advertisement matter? These questions are specifically designed to help students think about the connections across audience, genre conventions, and purpose as they analyze each advertisement in discussion. The second pedagogical technique, included in Appendix A, is a short assignment based off of the discussion strategy I describe in this artifact. While the discussion activity is done in real-time as a classroom exercise, this proposed assignment sheet is a way of replicating the flow of the discussion activity while retaining a focus on multimodality. The short assignment reaffirms multimodal analysis skills as students move from class discussion to composition. In the short assignment, students are asked to find a multimodal text, select salient details about that text, and plot them visually on the rhetorical triangle provided. Once done with this, students are asked to label each point with one or more rhetorical appeals to which they correspond. This mapping practice serves as a form of multimodality in combining a visual metaphor—the rhetorical triangle—with textual details. Once students have accomplished this portion of the assignment, they write a paragraph in which they select the most important detail and describe how it functions rhetorically in the text.

This proposed assignment sheet asks students to select their own multimodal text and analyze it rhetorically using the visually based rhetorical triangle. This triangle, as seen in Figure 1, is a heuristic used throughout this course to help students envision rhetorical connections in a given text through revealing the relationship across creator, purpose, and audience.

To begin the discussion activity, I show a 60-second Apple advertisement entitled “The Human Family” (2016). The advertisement consists of a series of photographs and video clips joined with the word “by” and the name of the creator. At the end of the advertisement, the text reads “Shot on iPhone.” The audible portion of the advertisement is a voiceover of Maya Angelou reading her poem “The Human Family.” The

advertisement, shown in Figure 2, incorporates a minimalistic approach with a focus on diversity and togetherness.

**Figure 1.** Diagram of the rhetorical triangle.



(Note. I use a version of this rhetorical triangle throughout the course to help students visualize the interplay across purpose, creator, and audience in a multimodal text.)

**Figure 2.** Screenshot from Apple's "The Human Family" featuring a photo of two individuals shot by Shardul T.

(Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9adfIFfYaCM>).



As a dynamic multimodal text, this advertisement introduces students to the idea of multimodality in general. The piece is compelling in terms of the variety of elements present, such as sound, imagery, color, etc., as well as in its focus on several important themes. By incorporating Maya Angelou's reading of her poem "The Human Family," we see themes of diversity and unity in difference across these elements (see Appendix B). All of these components are neatly packaged in an advertisement for the iPhone camera.

After showing this advertisement in class, I ask students a simple question, "What do you notice?" This question comes in part from an activity in David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephens' (2018) textbook *Writing Analytically* (pp. 17-19). As an exercise in metacognition, the activity asks students to pay attention to the details they noticed first, choose a few of those details to focus on, and rank the details in order of interest or importance. I encourage students to individualize their answer to this question by reminding them that everyone's diverse perspective will probably mean that we have all noticed different things. Students are also encouraged to reflect on *how* they answer this question with their own analytical processes. If students hesitate to begin this discussion, I ask them to give a simple description of what is happening in the advertisement. This question helps students practice summary skills while providing some additional scaffolding to prepare them for the analytical work of noticing and ranking details. This strategy also allows students to riff off of the answers of their classmates in order to provide a collaborative summary of the text through discussion.

With this particular advertisement, my students are typically active in their engagement with the multimodal elements of the text. Their attention is drawn to the combinations of audio and visual components that function together to create a sense of unity and cohesion. These elements help students to identify the rhetorical purpose of the advertisement; we can come together, even though we all come from different places with different languages and cultural traditions. After this preliminary round of observations, I ask students to identify some of the elements that make the text multimodal. Answers like "sound" and "photographs" and "video" come up in discussion alongside a recognition of the text-based elements like the words "Shot by" and the Apple logo. When asked what details they noticed, students often identify the overarching themes of "diversity", "difference", or "culture." Some students will extend this answer by referring to the audio rather than the visuals. Students also exhibit a clear awareness of how the multiple modes come together by referring to the convergences between audio and visual details.

Once the discussion is underway, I ask my students to push their analyses further in order to identify the motivations behind this multimodal text in relation to its audience. When reminded that this text is an advertisement, students often begin to recognize the impact of audience and consider why an audience may find this appealing. They observe that there are a lot of people in the advertisement, just as there are a lot of people in the world. Apple wants to capitalize on that by marketing to everyone. The conversation at this point typically needs little intervention from me, as my students continue to ask

themselves why. Why themes of diversity? Why themes of unity? I leave them with one question: who is represented here?

With this last scaffolded question, students connect several dots to come to significant conclusions about the rhetorical efficacy of this piece. In their conclusions, the rhetorical purpose of the advertisement shifts from a message on unity and diversity to a message of consumerism. The unifying element of the advertisement, in all its feel-good themes, is the ownership and use of an iPhone. Students recognize the important idea here of unifying through respect for diversity in a global context, but they are also able to see this idea as a mask for a clever marketing ploy that appeals to the audience's pathos in order to encourage an us vs. them, or an in-group/out-group mentality.

From this activity forward, the analytical thought emphasized as an important characteristic in first-year writing becomes a practice with purpose and consequence in my classroom. This pedagogical exercise is the start of a series that we conduct in this unit. As my students practice, they become more sophisticated in their rhetorical approach to multimodality through repeatedly asking how and why questions as well as considering the texts via the rhetorical triangle. From here, we move to discussing the two other Apple advertisements in the series. The first one is entitled "What's a Computer" (2017) and combines upbeat music and various textual elements displayed on an iPad with a narrative of a child exploring a city (as seen in Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Screenshot from Apple's "What's a Computer? (2017) advertisement. Child character from Apple's "What's a Computer?" advertisement. (Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pl-iJcC9JUc>).



As students work with this advertisement, they are already thinking about the strategies employed by Apple to connect with the audience and convince them to purchase a product. Discussion with this advertisement evolves from describing details to focusing our analysis on specific elements within the text, as well as their relationship to the audience and purpose of the text. For instance, students often note that the

character in Apple's "What's a Computer" advertisement presents as androgynous. When asked to reflect on why this detail may be important, students consider the multiple ways that gender can be constructed in order for Apple to appeal to several different audiences at once. This detail, in combination with the upbeat music and overall theme of exploration in the advertisement, reveals a rhetorical function of the advertisement as students identify who the audience is in relation to the character, purpose, and creator of the advertisement.

The final advertisement we watch in the sequence of the three is entitled "iPhone X-Animoji Yourself" (2017). The advertisement itself (as seen in Figure 4) features similar elements to the ones preceding it in that it relies on a well-curated combination of upbeat audio and intriguing visuals. It differs, however, through its use of animation alongside human characters that shows the convergence of facial recognition software, iPhone users, and emojis.

As the unit builds in complexity, the discussion also evolves. The showing of this advertisement comes after a lesson on rhetorical appeals. In discussing this advertisement, students move from summarizing details and identifying rhetorical features to considering how this advertisement appeals to the audience through the use of pathos, logos, and ethos, or the appeal to emotion, logic, and credibility respectively. Students are also able to demonstrate their understanding of complex rhetorical features through analysis of the Animoji advertisement by noting the shift in feeling across the entire sequence of advertisements. While "The Human Family" (2016) conveys a more serious tone, "iPhone X-Animoji Yourself" (2017) creates an energetic and jovial tone through the use of happier music, brighter colors, and a more lighthearted message. Through analyzing this sequence of Apple advertisements, students build their rhetorical

**Figure 4.** Apple's "iPhone X-Animoji Yourself." Screenshot of message including Animoji. (Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMiHeAU-ABs>).



awareness from noticing a selection of details to identifying the complex relationship across rhetorical purpose, creator, and audience, to pinpointing how the creator uses certain rhetorical strategies, like appeals, to create a particular mood in the audience.

Through their engagement in a rhetorical analysis of each of these advertisements, students gradually build an attunement to multimodal texts. This is a critical component of encouraging students to develop “an ear for ... difference or multiplicity” (Leonard, 2014, p. 228). Students quickly notice that each advertisement shares a common goal—persuade the audience to purchase an Apple product. By focusing on an analysis of how each advertisement seeks to accomplish this goal in a multimodal format, students identify key differences in each advertisement that appeal to diverse audiences through a variety of rhetorical features. Furthermore, students reflect on their own multiplicity within the classroom by sharing their analytical processes with classmates in discussion. Through recognizing the rhetorical nature of multiplicity in multimodal texts, students are encouraged to bring their own diverse perspectives into conversation with a variety of situations and texts.

By cultivating students’ attunement to the rhetorical complexities of multimodal texts, instructors can help their students value difference and multiplicity by approaching unfamiliar or unconventional multimodal texts as sites of rhetorical analysis. This kind of thinking can extend into other writing situations, making the unfamiliar nature of academic reading and writing a tool of exploration and discovery. The enhanced complexity and newfound rhetorical skills cultivated through the aforementioned activities do not stay stagnant within the second unit of my class. Rather, they reflect in the culminating assignment of the second unit in which students choose their own multimodal text to analyze. Additionally, the skills practiced in this unit are especially helpful for carrying over into the research unit that follows. At this point in their education, my students are usually unfamiliar with close analysis of multimodal texts and how they function rhetorically. As such, the practice of analyzing these texts can seem strange and uncomfortable, but it also allows additional room for play and interpretation. Later on, as my students are asked to engage with scholarly research in the third unit, some for the first time in an American context, the practice with multimodal texts helps to build an awareness and confidence with texts that are unfamiliar, and sometimes unapproachable at first glance.

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## Appendix A. Rhetorical Analysis of Multimodal Texts

### ***The Assignment***

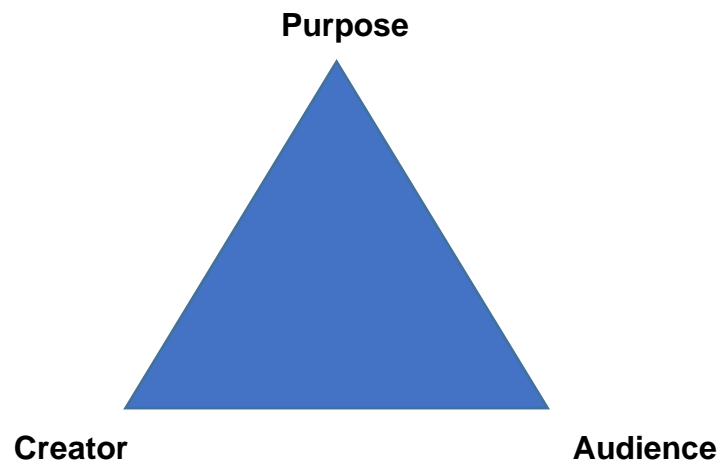
Multimodal texts are everywhere! We encounter these types of texts in everyday situations, though we may not recognize them as texts. For this assignment, find a multimodal text and analyze it by identifying its key details. Then, plot these details onto the rhetorical triangle and label each one with a rhetorical appeal to which it corresponds. You may label a single detail with more than one rhetorical appeal. Then, select one detail from your diagram and write a paragraph about how this detail functions in the text and why it is important for the audience of the text to recognize it.

### ***Learning Outcomes***

In doing this assignment, we accomplish the following:

- Identify and summarize a key detail in a text
- Learn to think about multimodal texts as rhetorical
- Relate a detail to larger contexts by thinking through the rhetorical appeals

### **Plot the key details on the rhetorical triangle**



**Write a short paragraph about your key detail and how it functions rhetorically.**

## **Appendix B. Maya Angelou's "Human Family"**

I note the obvious differences  
in the human family.

Some of us are serious,  
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived  
as true profundity,  
and others claim they really live  
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones  
can confuse, bemuse, delight,  
brown and pink and beige and purple,  
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas  
and stopped in every land,  
I've seen the wonders of the world  
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women  
called Jane and Mary Jane,  
but I've not seen any two  
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different  
although their features jibe,  
and lovers think quite different thoughts  
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,  
we weep on England's moors,  
and laugh and moan in Guinea,  
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,  
are born and die in Maine.  
In minor ways we differ,

in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences  
between each sort and type,  
but we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.