Writing for Digital Media

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CRITICAL LITERACY

1. Introduction

We'll begin our exploration into writing for digital media with a fundamental premise that is both obvious and profound: Digital media is *ubiquitous*. Something that is ubiquitous is everywhere, all the time. Constant. Its prevalence in our lives has deep and enduring consequences, though it's easy to become desensitized and overlook what those consequences might be. Our devices—our cell phones, smart watches, digital assistants (e.g., Echo Dots), laptops, iPads, smart TVs—are ubiquitous. For many of us, there isn't a single moment of the day when our cell phone isn't within arm's reach so that we can quickly, if not compulsively, check our email, respond to a text message, scroll through social media, read the latest news updates, and so on.

Certainly, we are in the digital age. Reports vary depending on demographics, but many studies, including [this one](#)from *Forbes*, estimate that the average American spends nearly seven hours a day on some form of digital media (Koetsier, "Global"). This *Forbes* article describes our usage as "consumption," which underscores the idea that we are perpetually compelled to engage in digital spaces and that we internalize those digital interactions as we form ideas about what is valuable or normal or true. So much of what we know about the world, from history to current events to every other subject imaginable, comes from the internet in some form. It not only provides information that helps shape our worldviews, beliefs, and identities, but it mediates most of our communication with other people, and it facilitates many of our daily activities, from ordering food to paying bills to finding the fastest route to our next destination. The word "consumption" also highlights the commercial aspect of digital media. Not only is digital content a commodity, but users themselves have become commodities as organizations compete for more views, likes, shares, click-throughs, and subscribers.

It's no wonder that digital literacy has become such an important topic. In this book, digital literacy is defined as the ability to engage with digital spaces in meaningful, productive, and ethical ways to achieve personal, professional, or civic goals. It includes the strategies we use to find and evaluate information. It also includes our ability to share information and respond to others thoughtfully, strategically, and respectfully. In other words, digital literacy is more than knowing *how*. Yes, it's important to know *how* to publish a website or *how* to create a social media post. However, it's equally important to know *why* you are making certain choices and *to what effect*. Of particular importance are the ethical consequences of those choices. While many digital writers and designers leverage their rhetorical skills effectively in order to manipulate, dismiss, confuse, and control their audience, this textbook emphasizes digital literacy as an opportunity to develop a deeper awareness of complex power structures and social injustices that are often ignored and to challenge the status quo.

The most recent [student learning standards](#) published by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) articulate the goals of digital literacy quite well. In acknowledging how important it is to prepare students "to thrive in a constantly evolving technological landscape," ISTE identifies seven core objectives:

1. **Empowered Learner**: Students leverage technology to take an active role in choosing, achieving, and demonstrating competency in their learning goals.
2. **Digital Citizen**: Students recognize the rights; responsibilities; and opportunities of living, learning, and working in an interconnected digital world, and they act and model in ways that are safe, legal, and ethical.
3. **Knowledge Constructor**: Students critically curate a variety of resources using digital tools to construct knowledge, produce creative artifacts, and make meaningful learning experiences for themselves and others.

4. **Innovative Designer**: Students use a variety of technologies within a design process to identify and solve problems by creating new, useful, or imaginative solutions.
5. **Computational Thinker**: Students develop and employ strategies for understanding and solving problems in ways that leverage the power of technological methods to develop and test solutions.
6. **Creative Communicator**: Students communicate clearly and express themselves creatively for a variety of purposes using the platforms, tools, styles, formats, and digital media appropriate to their goals.
7. **Global Collaborator**: Students use digital tools to broaden their perspectives and enrich their learning by collaborating with others and working effectively in teams locally and globally. (International Society for Technology in Education)

Digital Literacy Graph, by Cara Miller
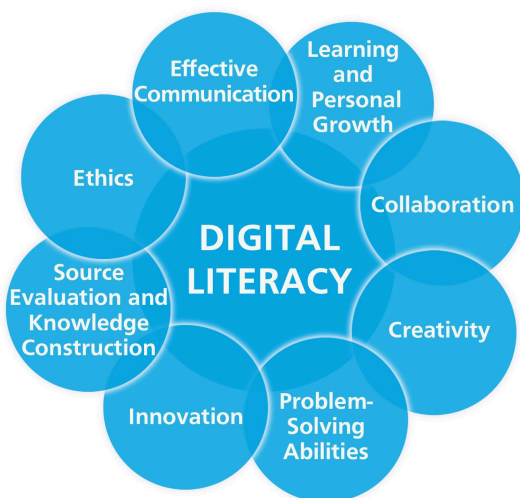
These standards underscore the deep critical thinking, developed from a strong sense of social ethics and personal values, that true digital literacy entails. And these skills have never been so important. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, everything shifted to the digital realm—classes, jobs, church attendance, doctor appointments, grocery shopping, conversations with family and friends. Digital media became our lifeline to the outside world and helped us maintain some sense of normalcy. Social media platforms exploded with chatter from people who were desperate to make connections with other people and to gain perspective on the ongoing crisis. While some of these interactions were positive, strengthening a sense of community and belonging, many were not. Fueled by the political and financial agendas of powerful media and commercial organizations, confusion, misinformation, conflict, and ultimately division have permeated social media. So many posts are hateful. So many people are unwilling (unable?) to listen to perspectives different from their own. Way too many people automatically accept or reject information that either coincides with or contradicts what they already believe—what they *want* to believe.

Recently, Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, wrote an [open letter](#) about the "sources of dysfunction" on the web. He says, "The fight for the web is one of the most important causes of our time," advocating for the need to protect human rights, equal access, and the open marketplace of ideas and social progress that the web was designed to provide. It follows, then, that true digital literacy is about much more than scrolling, surfing, liking, posting selfies, gaining followers, influencing buying habits, and spreading your opinions with the intent to shut other people down. It's also not about being as active as possible on as many platforms as possible. In fact, given the ubiquitous nature of digital media, intentionality and selectivity are crucial. True digital literacy is about meaningful and thoughtful engagement that has a positive impact on you as well as the communities of which you are a part.

Writing for Digital Media was written with these lofty ideals

in mind. This first chapter focuses on the historical shift from legacy media to digital media, which gave rise to active participation and personalization by and for everyday citizens, who experienced significantly more control over their media experiences. Even more significant were the fundamental changes to communication patterns and social interactions. The second part of the chapter sets up the remainder of the textbook by describing the overall framework of the remaining chapters and how that framework relates to the definition of digital literacy discussed above.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the history of digital media and how it quickly evolved to transform our daily lives.
- Compare the original intent of the World Wide Web to the current reality of privatization and commercial enterprise.
- Consider the trade-offs as technologies have developed to afford greater access to and participation in a growing marketplace of ideas.
- Recognize the ways that powerful organizations have sought to control the flow of public information throughout history.
- Compare the differences in audience engagement between traditional media and digital media.
- Understand the organizational structure of the textbook and how different forms of literacy create a more holistic and flexible approach to digital writing.

The History of Digital Media

A brief history lesson is in order to contextualize our digital media use and the opportunities it affords. It's actually a pretty short history given that the World Wide Web, which precipitated the mass adoption of digital media, is little more than 30 years old. On the other hand, in that short period of time, it has grown at an astronomical rate. According to Broadband Search, 5.25 billion people worldwide are currently connected to the internet, which represents 66.2% of the world's population, and that number grows by the millions every year. In fact, the percentage of online users grew by 1,355% from 2020 to 2022. The site goes on with statistics about the millions of people who are active on social media, who write blogs, who utilize video streaming services, and who shop online. Perhaps even more significant is the sharp increase in remote working (Saad and Wigert) and remote learning (National Center for Education Statistics) in the U.S., along with the recent spike in e-commerce that continues to claim a higher percentage of our total retail sales every year (U.S. Department of Commerce).

It's not an exaggeration by any stretch to say that digital media is a central component of our daily lives—or that most of the world would come to a grinding halt without it. Given this reality, it's even more startling to consider digital media's humble beginning. Development happened in stages, beginning with the invention of Colossus in 1944 (National Museum of Computing, "Colossus"). As its name suggests, Colossus was enormous, approximately the size of a living room and weighing more than five tons. And in contrast to the multifunctional, general-purpose devices we have today, Colossus had one job: to decode encrypted messages between Hitler and his troops during World War II. It was also incredibly slow: 5,000 characters per second compared with modern computers that process billions of instructions per second (Copeland).
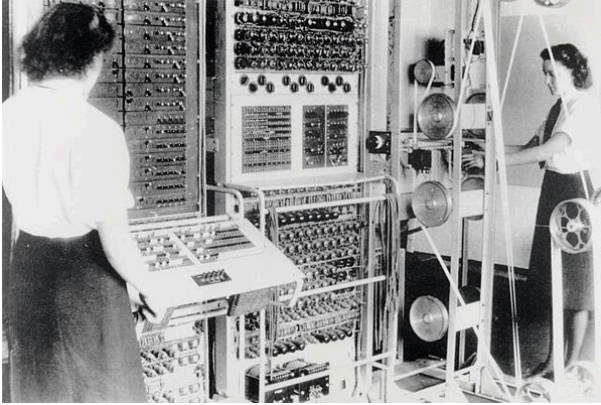
Colossus, by author unknown ([CC0](#))

What made Colossus *digital* was the way that it processed and stored information using Boolean logic. Though it didn't have software to direct its operations like today's digital devices, it did have a series of switches and plugs that worked much the same way to create binary values (positive and nonpositive) that told it what to do and could be expanded to create complex functions. Of course, in this early stage as digital technology became faster and held more memory capacity, its use was strictly limited to governmental purposes. In fact, the very existence of Colossus was kept secret [until 1975](#) so that it could remain a secret weapon of the military (National Museum of Computing, "Colossus Decrypts").

The internet was also developed as a tool for the U.S. military, this time as a [mechanism of defense during the Cold War](#) (History.com). Out of growing concerns for what might happen if the Soviet Union figured out how to shut down our telephone system—the crux of long-distance communication at the time—ARPAnet was created in 1965 to enable government computers to share information. Developed by electrical engineers and mathematicians at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), ARPAnet was special because it used "packet switching" to break down information into chunks of data that

would have unique routing paths to their destination. This made it much less vulnerable to interception or enemy attack. However, development was fairly slow. It wasn't until 1969 that the first message was sent from one (gigantic) computer to another. The word "login" was sent as a test, but only "lo" made it through before the system crashed. Eventually, electronic mail became one of the most important functions of ARPAnet.

Another challenge was figuring out how to grow the network. In fact, there wasn't one singular network. ARPAnet, with its handful of computers, became one among several other mini-networks. As the number of packet-switching networks with differing configurations grew and tried to connect to one another, it became increasingly difficult to integrate them into one seamless communication system. As a result, Transmission Control Protocol / Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) was developed in the late 1970s by Vinton Cerf and Robert Kahn, often referred to as the "fathers of the internet" (Nott). TCP/IP was—and still is—the fundamental language that allowed networks with different configurations to communicate, effectively bringing everything together under the umbrella of one global network.

Despite its growing capabilities, the use of the internet was restricted to government officials, military personnel, and university professors throughout the 1980s. The National Science Foundation developed the Computer Science Network (CSNET) for university computer scientists across the country, and as the need for faster communication amid increasing traffic arose, NSFNET was developed in 1986 as the "backbone" of an internet infrastructure that would later support widespread use (National Science Foundation, "A Brief History"). The most popular online communications at the time were email, discussion groups (1979) (Encyclopedia Britannica, "USENET"), Internet Relay Chat (IRC; 1988) (Dominquez), and text-based games (i.e., Multi-User Dungeons [MUDs] and MUD Object-Oriented games [MOOs]).

In other words, functionality as well as access was still fairly limited throughout the 1980s, but all of that changed in 1991 with

the advent of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee. The web allowed use of the internet to go beyond simply sending information from one computer to another. Users could now post and retrieve information that was intended for mass consumption across the web. The web became a mechanism for sharing information among all participants, and with the release of the first popular web browser ([Mosaic](), later called Netscape) in 1993, the web became accessible for public use (Andreessen). From that moment on, the number of participants in as well as the varying uses of the internet grew exponentially, which precipitated the rapid advancement of digital media devices and platforms that have transformed our everyday lives.

Commercialization of the Internet

If the development of the internet was central to the advancement of digital media, so too was the commercialization of the internet as companies found ways to capitalize on its capabilities for financial gain. This continues to be an [issue of debate]() as large corporations continually pioneer technological advances in order to privatize their services and extend their commercial reach (Goodman). On the one hand, these commercial firms paved the way for mass adoption of the internet and the digital innovations that are fundamental to our personal and professional activities. But on the other hand, the increasing commercialization of the internet has shifted its underlying purpose—from information sharing and collaboration to targeted marketing, clickbait, and commodification of all goods and services. Users themselves have [become commodities]() in the fight to capture attention and increase CTRs (click-through rates) (Hess).

      When the National Science Foundation (NSF) developed NSFNET, its purpose was to further the [advancement of education and research](), not commercial enterprise (Legal Information

Institute). In fact, the use of NSFNET for commercial purposes was banned. It was free for academic institutions to share and access information. The NSF also paid for domain names so that it was free for users to register a website. But as the network grew, extending to university libraries, public schools, small-town libraries, and eventually individual households, it became more difficult for the NSF to keep up with the growing demand, and private companies battled for control. [Commercialization occurred in stages](#) throughout the 1990s (National Science Foundation, "A Brief History"), which was marked by several pivotal changes:

- "The World" emerged as the [first commercial internet service provider](#) (ISP; 1989). Though its dial-up service was incredibly slow by today's standards, the number of customers multiplied (Schuster).
- The NSF lifted the ban that prevented the commercial use of the internet (1991). Private industries could now use the internet for business and commercial purposes. More commercial ISPs became available, including CompuServe, The Source, and America Online (AOL).
- Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web (1991), which is now commonly known as Web 1.0 because it focused on providing information to users, but pages were static and didn't allow for much user participation. He later advocated for widespread public use of the web by [relinquishing proprietary rights](#) to the code he created (1993) (World Wide Web Foundation). The World Wide Web was the first internet browser, making it possible to search for specific information. Other browsers, including Netscape Navigator and Microsoft's Internet Explorer, improved the internet's functionality and prompted increased growth.
- The NSF solicited bids from private companies to manage nonmilitary domain registrations (1993). Network Solutions, Inc. was awarded the five-year contract, and under their management, the number of commercial domains grew rapidly,

increasing from 7,500 domain names in 1993 to more than two million at the end of their contract in 1998. In 1995, the NSF began charging a fee for domain registration.

- NSFNET was decommissioned (1995), which allowed for greater public access as private companies made their internet services available (National Science Foundation, "The Internet"). The NSF officially and completely discontinued any direct control it had over the management of the internet (1998).

- Technological advances throughout the 1990s and early 2000s made the internet much faster and more versatile. Broadband services included DSL (Digital Subscriber Line), cable internet, and fiber optic lines, which transferred increasing amounts of data that could travel around the world at the speed of light (Encyclopedia Britannica, "DSL").

- Google began in 1998 as a search engine and soon offered other services, including email, analytical tools, maps, advertising programs, and a mobile operating system (Google). Of particular importance was the algorithm Google used to rank web pages in order of relevance and credibility (Star). Soon, companies were paying for ads and also "optimizing" their websites to ensure more prominent placement.

- Mobile internet technology became more advanced with the introduction of the 2G cellular network (1991), which allowed users to access media content and communicate via text message (SMS) and multimedia message (MMS). The iPhone 2G was released in 2007, but it was quickly replaced as 3G, 4G, and 5G technology developed, offering higher speeds, more data transfer, higher-quality streaming, and more functionality (Eadicicco).

- Web 2.0 was introduced (2004) with a focus on user-generated content and increased interaction among users (Encyclopedia Britannica, "Web 2.0"). Social media platforms like MySpace (launched in 2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and X (2006; formerly known as Twitter) became increasingly

popular. However, increased user participation also resulted in more marketing opportunities as well as analytical features that allowed companies to collect information about specific behaviors and buying patterns.

Of course, that was just the beginning. In the last two decades, advancing technologies have made it possible to capture people's attention at all times of the day and night, even as they move from place to place. A recent article from the Pew Research Center reports that 85% of Americans own a smartphone, a number that is up significantly from just 35% in 2011 ("Mobile Fact Sheet"). What's more, people's digital media usage has more than doubled, as evidenced by the chart below by Our World In Data. While people averaged less than three hours a day of digital media usage in 2008, they averaged well above six hours a day by 2018. That number rose above seven hours in 2022, according to Insider Intelligence (Cramer-Flood). More time spent on digital media means more opportunities for companies to advertise to potential consumers, which is why they put so much money into targeted marketing, omnichannel messaging, optimizing their websites, sending push notifications, and tracking users' online behaviors and buying habits. They want to tap into the digital economy, which rose to a record-breaking $1.09 trillion in 2022 (Koetsier, "E-Commerce Retail").

Daily hours spent with digital media, United States
Average hours per day spent engaging with digital media (e.g. digital images and videos, web pages, social media apps, etc.) The data for 'other connected devices' includes game consoles. Mobile includes smartphones & tablets. All data includes both home & work usage for people 18+.
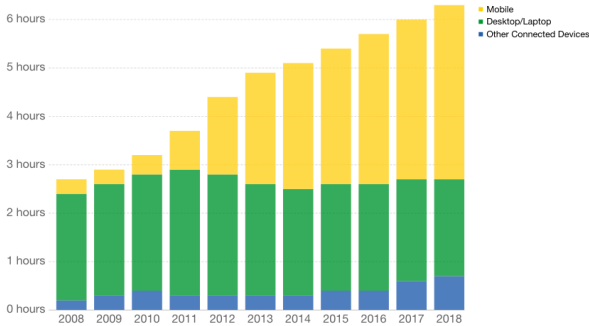
Source: BOND Internet Trends (2019)

CC BY

As companies increasingly used digital spaces to compete for people's attention (and money), several trends emerged in the 2010s:

- **Social media marketing.** While just 5% of the adult population used social media in 2005, today more than 72% use some sort of social media (Pew Research Center, "Social Media"). In fact, about half of Americans use social media as their primary source of news information (Pew Research Center, "News Consumption"). Social media has also become an important tool for social activists (consider the Arab Spring [Hempel] or the 2019 protests in Hong Kong [Shao], for instance), humanitarian campaigns (e.g., the war in Ukraine [Spotlite]), and political campaigns (Wharton). Most prominent are businesses that use social media to interact with customers and advertise their latest products and services. According to a recent *Forbes* article, 77% of small businesses use social media regularly (Wong). Many companies use social media as their primary method of marketing, believing that it is the most effective way to reach their target audience (Cision).
- **Influencers.** Increasingly, businesses hire influencers to

engage with potential customers because they already have a large number of social media followers and can leverage those connections to influence people's buying habits. They test products and make recommendations, and while it might seem that these people have the consumer's best interest at heart, the reality is sometimes a little different. "On the consumer side, the relationship between influencers and consumers is based on perceived closeness, authenticity, and trust," according to Michaelsen et al., who go on to discuss the potentially negative impact of influencers on consumers, particularly more vulnerable populations such as children or consumers with low education. Their study found several negative characteristics of influencer marketing, including "lack of transparency and unclear disclosure, lack of separation between advertising and content misleading messages, and targeting vulnerable consumer groups" (Michaelsen et al. 10). While in some instances it's considered unlawful for an influencer to endorse specific products without fully disclosing that they are being paid to do so—see the anti-touting provision (Section 17b) of the Securities Act (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, "Securities") and the recent charges against Kim Kardashian for using social media to endorse an investment opportunity (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, "SEC Charges")—influencers often don't fully disclose their financial incentives.

- **App culture and push notifications.** You're probably familiar with Apple's catchphrase "There's an app for that," which debuted in a 2009 commercial advertising iPhone's latest capabilities. Since then, app culture has exploded with entertainment, educational, and lifestyle applications, which provide quick and easy access to a variety of activities and information. They also allow for notifications to be pushed out to users, often prompting them to take action to open the application, visit the website, or take advantage of a new product or promotional opportunity. While the Pew Research

Center reported in 2010 that fewer than half (43%) of cell phone users had apps on their phones ("The Rise of Apps Culture"), more recent data suggest that the average cell phone user has 40 apps installed on their phone and consistently accesses 18 of those apps (Kataria).

- **Gig economy.** With more websites, applications, and channels of communication, more businesses and freelancers have emerged in the "gig economy," which relies mostly on short-term and contract employees who value their independence to accept or decline jobs as they see fit but who also must "produce or perish" (Petriglieri et al.). In 2015, Hillary Clinton forecasted the "exciting" economic opportunities and new innovations that stemmed from the gig economy (qtd. in Sundararajan), but some people point out that on-demand businesses like Uber, Airbnb, Etsy, and TaskRabbit are the true beneficiaries, making money off the labor exchange without having to provide consistent salaries or benefits: "There's a risk we might devolve into a society in which the on-demand many end up serving the privileged few" (Sundararajan).

- **IoT and big data.** The Internet of Things (IoT) refers to the emergence of objects and systems that use wireless internet connections to send and receive data, often through the convenience of your phone (Fruhlinger). Think about all of the devices that have emerged in the last 10 years with the word "smart" in front of them—smart watches, smart TVs, smart refrigerators, smart door locks, smart thermostats, smart vacuums. A 2019 article in *Priceonomics* put it like this:

> The growth of Internet of Things in terms of number of devices, revenue generated, and data produced has been stunning, but most predictions expect that growth to accelerate. The number of connected devices is expected to grow to 50 billion in 2020 (from 8.7 billion in 2012) and the annual revenue from IoT sales is forecast to hit $1.6 trillion by 2025 (from just $200 billion today). (Team Recurrency)

The article goes on to discuss the astronomical amount of data (otherwise known as big data) collected by these devices—upward of 4.4 zettabytes in 2020—which is used to track user behaviors and trends, understand consumer needs, make product upgrades, and essentially market more relevant products and services to customers. While this might seem like a benefit in many ways, there are concerns about how closely IoT devices allow large corporations and government entities to track people's behavior. Josh Fruhlinger used the recent example of a [map released by X-Mode](#) (O'Sullivan) in 2020 that was designed to track the location of spring breakers as they left Fort Lauderdale. The purpose was to predict the spread of COVID-19, but it also demonstrated "just how closely IoT devices can track us" (Fruhlinger).

- **User tracking.** While we're on the topic of user tracking, it's another trend that emerged in the 2010s. Although Urchin was an analytics business that formed in the early days of the web (1995), it wasn't bought out by Google to become Google Analytics until 2005, and there weren't sophisticated tracking tools until 2014, when Google released Universal Analytics, which could track individual users across multiple devices and platforms (Visualwebz). Once more, the benefit is a more enjoyable user experience, though there are significant concerns about user tracking, data security, and the use of data to not only predict but also compel purchasing decisions (Zuboff).
- **Artificial intelligence.** You might be surprised to learn that artificial intelligence (AI) [dates back to the 1950s](#) as technology advanced allowing computers to more easily store information and use algorithms to complete tasks (Anyoha). However, it wasn't until the 2010s that AI became commonplace through Alexa devices, GPS, talk-to-text applications, and so on. Most of us encounter AI devices multiple times throughout the day,

and our use of those devices (and the data collected as a result) is used in turn to train the AI to become smarter and better at what it does. Many IoT devices use AI to simulate human intelligence and complete tasks. This is called "machine learning," which David Grossman describes as "exciting and somewhat terrifying" given this potential for complex functionality. Peskoe-Yang explains that as we use AI in our daily lives, "AI is tasked not only with finding the answers to questions about data sets, but with finding the questions themselves; successful deep learning applications require vast amounts of data and the time and computational power to self-test over and over again." While recent AI technologies like ChatGPT have created some exciting opportunities, there are concerns about the performance accuracy of ChatGPT (Chen et al.) and the ethical implications of relying on AI devices fueled by biased algorithms (UNESCO).

- **Scams and security breaches.** Let's not forget about those scammers, hackers, and phishers who are also hoping to profit from advanced technologies and all the user data out there. While viruses and other types of malware became a concern in the early 2000s, cybercrime became much more profound and sophisticated in the 2010s as criminals developed "multi-vector attacks and social engineering" (Chadd). Expensive data breaches have affected not only large corporations and government entities but also individual users, which is why cybersecurity has become such an important (and lucrative) field (Fortune Business Insights).

We now live in a world where the quality of life seems to hinge on the speed of our internet connection as billions of people spend hours every day streaming their favorite shows, scrolling through social media, and browsing Amazon merchandise. User activities are tracked and assessed for the purposes of providing more targeted, personalized ads and creating a more positive user experience that perpetuates increasing dependence on digital

technologies. In so many ways, the commercialization of the internet ushered in the digital age that has provided tangible benefits in communication, entertainment, collaboration, access to information, and countless daily conveniences. But at what cost? According to Business Insider, 90% of the information we consume is controlled by a handful of powerful corporations (Lutz). Increased surveillance, misuse of personal data, cyberbullying, addiction, burnout, and self-indulgence are equally prevalent. These are issues that we will examine more closely in the first section of the textbook, which focuses on writing and digital media from a critical perspective.

Acronyms from this Chapter

Acronym	Full Name	Description
ARPAnet	Advanced Research Projects Agency Network	The first public packet-switched network, created by DARPA in 1965.
DARPA	Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency	Research agency that is part of the United States Department of Defense. It developed ARPAnet.
CSNET	Computer Science Network	Network developed in the 1980s by the Computer Science Network for university computer scientists across the country.
CTR	click-through rate	The number of times an ad receives a "click" to see more information divided by the number of views.
DSL	digital subscriber line	A collection of technologies that transmit digital data over the telephone line.
IoT	Internet of Things	The network of devices that connect to the internet and can exchange data with other devices and systems over the internet.
IRC	Internet Relay Chat	Text-based chat system for instant messaging.
ISP	internet service provider	Company that provides internet access.

ISTE	International Society for Technology in Education	"A passionate community of global educators who believe in the power of technology to transform teaching and learning" ([ISTE, "About"](#)).
MOO	MUD Object-Oriented	Online virtual reality system in which players are connected at the same time.
MUD	Multi-User Dungeon	A multiplayer online space.
NSF	National Science Foundation	A government agency that supports research and education in science and engineering.
NSFNET	National Science Foundation Network	Network developed by the National Science Foundation in 1986 as the "backbone" of an internet infrastructure.
TCP/IP	Transmission Control Protocol / Internet Protocol	A standardized set of rules for delivering data across a digital network.

The Shift to Participatory Media

One last historical shift is especially relevant to the scope of this book: that from traditional media, in which audiences took a passive role in their media consumption, to digital media, in which users are actively searching for the information they want and contributing to the pool of information with their own posts, shares, and comments. While this is such common practice in our current daily lives that

it hardly seems remarkable, it's particularly significant when we consider the larger historical context of censorship, in which institutions with centralized authority—such as the [Catholic church in the fourteenth century](#) (Mark) or the [American government during the colonial period](#) (Lokey)—controlled the flow of information to the masses. In fact, the invention of the Gutenberg Press in 1445 and the [subsequent increase in literacy rates](#) (Ormond) was considered a threat to the centralized authority of the church because people had more direct access to information and could read and interpret that information for themselves—and form their own opinions. You probably already know that literacy is a powerful tool for personal and intellectual growth, independence, and expression, which is why marginalized groups have historically been discouraged from reading (e.g., [anti–literacy laws for slaves](#)) and especially from writing about their own experiences and perspectives (Maddox; [Monaghan](#)).

We could talk endlessly about how information has been distributed throughout history—[penny presses](#) and wire services, for instance (Illinois University Library), as well as more secretive and subversive methods ([Coleman](#); [Harriet Tubman Historical Society](#))—and the social effect this information had, such as [yellow journalism](#) (Ferguson III), [muckraking](#) (Schiffrin), [civic unrest](#) (Green), and [social movements](#) (Coleman). What seems most important is that the flow of information had a profound effect on people's thought patterns and worldviews, and the struggle to control that flow of information escalated as more people—usually professional writers—were able to publish their ideas. Further, as traditional media expanded to include radio and television, the amount of information people had access to grew exponentially. Suddenly, people could tune in from the comfort of their living rooms to watch their favorite show, learn about news events across the globe, and even hear directly from the president himself. However, it was a one-way line of communication. People themselves had very little control over the content that was widely dispersed for public consumption. They could tune in or not tune

in, read the morning paper or not, but it made no difference in the content itself, and to miss out on the latest news would mean falling behind in public affairs and being left out of the social discourse.

Importantly, the limitations of traditional media stemmed from the technology that was available. Traditional media, also known as legacy media, included newspapers, books, magazines, radio, and television—all of which were defined by key characteristics:

- **Intended for a mass audience.** The same information was available to everyone, without distinction, and people couldn't pick and choose the type of information that seemed most relevant or interesting to them.
- **Limited space.** A television or radio broadcast could only fit so much information into a 30-minute segment. Newspapers, books, and magazines were likewise limited by the amount of space available on the page.
- **Linear format.** No matter the publication, there was always a clear beginning and a clear ending, and people consumed the information in straightforward, chronological order.
- **Fixed.** Once something was published, it was permanently set on the page or the film. It couldn't be revised.
- **Noninteractive.** Audience members could only receive information. There was no way to participate in the conversation.
- **Limited access.** Because of the limitations already listed, the role of producing information was reserved for professionals in the industry—journalists, news anchors, actors/actresses, novelists. There was very little opportunity for everyday people to have their voices heard on a mass scale.

Obviously, digital media ushered in a new era that dramatically altered the relationship between everyday citizens and the flow of information. The emergence of the World Wide Web, cable television, social media, and an onslaught of digital devices

that make it possible for people to easily and quickly access the internet from almost anywhere has shifted our role from passive to active. People can actively search for the type of information they are looking for and cultivate an online repertoire of resources that fit their interests and perspectives. They can also contribute to the vast body of information that is available on the internet—without needing special credentials or authorization. In direct contrast to the limitations of traditional media, digital media is defined by qualities that invite user participation:

- **Personalized** based on online habits, interests, and the ability to customize your news feed.
- **Unlimited space**. The information available online is immeasurable and continues to expand.
- **Nonlinear formatting** as information is increasingly hyperlinked and put into chunks that can be viewed in any order.
- **Fluid**. Information posted to the internet can easily be updated.
- **Interactive** as people like, share, and comment on the information that is posted and can easily post their own information.

In so many ways, we have come full circle from the era of the Gutenberg Press. As new technologies emerge, they have completely revolutionized the way that we access information, which in turn has a deep and pervasive effect on our ways of thinking, being, and interacting with the world. Once again, as more voices emerge to share new ideas and perspectives, we often sacrifice quality for quantity and must question the credibility of information that is available. And once more, despite the purpose of the World Wide Web to be a marketplace for ideas and social progress, we must recognize the continuing (though certainly evolving) epic battle to control the flow of information and thought patterns for self-serving purposes.

Review the history of digital media as outlined in this chapter and make a list of key dates and events that you think are most important in understanding our current digital media practices. You might also add events to your list by reading sources that are linked in the text or by conducting your own research.

Once you've created your list, create some sort of visual representation of the events you've selected (a timeline, for instance, or a web). You can draw your visual representation. Or, ideally, you can use Canva, Photoshop, or some other design application of your choice to create a graphic that is informative, easy to understand, and visually appealing.

You will share your visual and explain the choices you made.

Looking Ahead: The Framework for This Textbook

At first glance, the topic of digital writing seems fairly straightforward. In fact, it's true in some ways that digital writing is similar to traditional print media and that some writing skills and strategies will be similar. However, digital writing is also different from traditional forms of writing in fundamental ways and,

therefore, often requires different strategies and skills, which we'll explore in-depth throughout this textbook. However, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the goal of this textbook is about more than *how* to apply certain strategies in digital spaces, but also *why* and *to what effect*. It's about having a deeper theoretical and ethical understanding of the communication choices you make, which will afford you greater intentionality and precision, not just in the things you write but in your interactions with other people and in your own literacy practices. To that end, the textbook casts a wider net to include both practice and theory, challenging readers to think critically about the opportunities that digital media affords as well as the challenges it presents to mental health, civil discourse, social justice, privacy, and so on.

The book is divided into three sections, mirroring the organizational structure of Stuart Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, which focuses more broadly on computer literacy and targets writing and communication teachers in higher education. However, Selber emphasizes the need to extend conversations about digital literacy far beyond a simple and prescriptive how-to guide. He writes, "It is clear…that computer literacy programs can take a rather monolithic and one-dimensional approach, ignoring the fact that computer technologies are embedded in a wide range of constitutive contexts, as well as entangled in value systems" (22). In other words, an effective educational approach to digital literacy provides critical-thinking tools that can be applied to different situations and guide a more informed decision-making process based on the context at hand. In that spirit, this textbook offers a top-down approach to writing for digital media by examining three different literacies:

1. **Critical literacy**, which challenges readers to think deeply about the affordances and constraints of digital media, their own practices, and the social ramifications of communication that takes place on digital platforms. In this first section, the word "critical" has two meanings. It relates to *critical thinking*

about relevant theories that can be used as lenses to examine social norms and personal habits of digital media use from a variety of perspectives. It also relates to *critical theory*, which focuses on power structures and cultural biases that marginalize certain groups of people while privileging others. The chapters in this first section are intended to provide deeper insights and new ways of thinking about digital media use that will inform the rest of the book.

2. **Rhetorical literacy**, which situates digital media as a communication tool that mediates between writers and their audiences, helping them to convey important ideas and perspectives as clearly as possible. All communication is about forging an understanding. Rhetoric is the study of how language (both verbal and nonverbal) is used in that endeavor, paying special attention to how a message is crafted by a speaker to engage a specific audience to fulfill key purpose(s) in a particular situation. This section of the book focuses on rhetorical considerations and strategies that make a message successful, particularly given the range of digital platforms and tools that are available.

3. **Functional literacy**, which is the nuts and bolts of digital writing, providing guidelines, best practices, and design strategies for a variety of genres. The last section also gives important information about content strategy, search engine optimization, copyright laws, accessibility considerations, and basic editing rules. In essence, this is the *how-to* part of the textbook that builds from the theoretical and rhetorical considerations of the previous sections.

If you are familiar with Selber's work, you might notice that this organization of sections is different from his as he begins with functional and then moves on to critical and then rhetorical. This book begins with critical literacy (arguably the most complex and theoretical) followed by rhetorical literacy because having this type of deeper awareness and reflection should be foundational

in guiding the specific writing choices you make, bringing certain issues into focus and informing strategies that will align with your values and resonate more deeply with your audience.

Obviously, digital media is always evolving. The historical shifts outlined in this first chapter are evidence of how quickly digital media has emerged to transform our daily lives. And there's no telling what digital innovations will arise in the years to come. The goal of this textbook is to provide a foundation of intellectual processes and rhetorical considerations that are flexible and easily adapted to a variety of circumstances, so that as new technologies evolve, so will you.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on your own digital media practices. What types of reading and writing do you do most often? How would your life be different without digital media?
2. Review the list of learning standards published by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). Can you come up with specific examples of each objective? How would you rank your own skills in each category?
3. Summarize the primary concerns outlined by Tim Berners-Lee in his open letter. In your opinion, which ones seem the most detrimental? Why? Are there other concerns about the state of the World Wide Web that you would add to the list?
4. What do you find most surprising about the history of digital media and the ways that technologies have

evolved?

5.   Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the commercialization of the internet.

6.   Give some examples of how commercialization and privatization affect your own digital experiences.

7.   How are the social and intellectual effects of the printing press similar to those of digital media?

8.   How and why have powerful organizations throughout history controlled the flow of public information? What is your reaction to claims that powerful corporations control the vast majority of information available?

9.   Summarize the three types of literacies that form the textbook's framework. Why is it beneficial to study digital writing using this top-down approach?

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2. The Myth of the Digital Panacea

It may seem counterintuitive for a textbook focused on writing and digital media to take a critical look at digital media and the way it functions in our lives, but that's what this section of the textbook does, beginning with this chapter that challenges the myth of the digital panacea. As discussed in the first chapter, the goal of the textbook as a whole is to foster personal awareness and purpose when it comes to the ways that you engage with digital texts. That means leveraging all of the tools at your disposal, coupled with a profound insight into the advantages and limitations of digital communication, so that you can communicate effectively in any context. Sometimes that will mean using digital platforms to send and receive information, and sometimes it won't because the reality is that digital media isn't a cure-all for the challenges we face. It doesn't automatically make our message clearer or better received. In fact, there will always be instances where you can't beat a face-to-face conversation or a handwritten letter. You have to think critically about the context at hand and *all* of the communications tools that are available to you.

The digital panacea is the opposite. It's an *un*critical way of using digital media with the underlying assumption that it is always automatically better. It's a utopian viewpoint that considers digital technology to be a sign of social progress—as if that progress is inherent in the technology itself and not the way we use it. It's a mindset that persists in almost every sector of society—health care, journalism, education, business. Some employers believe that digital technology will automatically improve productivity and customer satisfaction. Some viewers believe that the news media is automatically more credible because videos and commentary can be posted in real time. The digital panacea is especially prevalent in

the education sector, where some school boards and administrators believe that the more technology that is available, the more children will be engaged, the more they will learn, and the more we can remediate deficiencies for those who have fallen behind. In fact, [more young children](#) than ever before have their own tablets and are spending increasing amounts of time in front of a screen every day (Kamenetz). This doesn't automatically make them smarter or help with their development. In fact, it's often a hindrance when you consider things like increased anxiety, addiction, disinhibitions, and declining reading scores—all things that are discussed more fully in this chapter.

Of course, on the other side of the utopian perspective is the dystopian viewpoint, promoted by people who tend to think that digital technology is inherently bad. They are the ones quick to point out the addictive qualities of digital media, the lack of in-person interaction, the ways we are increasingly distracted by our devices. From this perspective, digital media is responsible for the erosion of social values and personal freedoms. Similar to the utopian perspective, the people with a dystopian viewpoint focus on qualities they believe are inherent in digital technologies, often ignoring the influence of personal decisions about usage.

While both perspectives have valid points, they both miss the point about critical thinking and the power we have to make choices about how digital technology is used. This chapter examines both the positive and negative outcomes of digital media use and ends with a practical guide for how you can think critically about and engage meaningfully with digital technology. Though this chapter doesn't focus exclusively on digital writing, the hope is that it will offer big-picture perspectives about digital media use in general, and that the theories and best practices offered here can be adapted and applied to specific situations, including those related to digital writing.

- Learn what it means to think critically about digital technologies and their effects.
- Examine the positive effects and digital media on our personal, educational, professional, and civic lives.
- Examine the more negative effects of digital media on our social, emotional, and cognitive health.
- Understand the complexities of our digital media use, considering the "both/and" perspective of its effects.
- Learn to examine your own digital media practices from a critical perspective, understanding your underlying objectives, assessing the positive and negative habits you have, and considering adjustments you can make for your own and others' well-being.

The Good: Benefits and Opportunities for Progress

Let's start with the good. Without question, digital media has afforded opportunities for some amazing achievements, and in so many ways, it has had a tangible positive effect on our lives. Don't mistake "critical" for "negative." A critical look at digital media would absolutely recognize the opportunities it affords—those that have

been actualized as well as those that (for now) have only been imagined. Indeed, a critical perspective would think realistically and creatively about the [benefits of digital media](), often evaluating traditional uses and communication strategies and also thinking outside of the box to forge new ways of thinking and doing (Anderson and Rainie). Let's look at some examples.

Group Discussion As A Picture For Clipart, by PIXY#ORG (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Personal

Probably the most obvious benefits of digital media are the improvements to our personal lives—our personal relationships, our free time, our home projects and personal budgets. It might be hard to believe, but people used to sit down for extended periods of time in order to pay bills, write checks, and balance their checkbooks. They had to take the time to put checks in envelopes, write the address and return address on each one, lick the flap, place the stamp, and then physically take their checks out to the mailbox. It was a tedious and time-consuming process, and it's just one example of how digital media has made our lives easier. Many people have autopay set up to automatically pay their monthly bills. In other instances, it's quick to go to a vendor's website and pay online. We can look at our bank apps anytime to see our current balance. Something that used to take hours now takes almost no time at all.

Here's another one for you: finding information used to be difficult. To research a topic meant that you had to *physically* go to the library and look for relevant information using a card catalog or by scrolling through microfilm. Let's say you identify a book from the card catalog that seems worthwhile. You'd have to write down that call number, go look for the book in the stacks, and then actually read the book to get the information you wanted. Maybe there'd be an index with the specific information listed that you are looking for, so you could quickly flip to the page, but then again, maybe not. You might have to check out the book, bring it home so you could read through it more carefully, and then remember to return it to the library before its due date. It's hard to believe that anybody went through all that time and trouble, isn't it? With our handheld digital devices, nearly any type of information we might want to know is accessible instantly. In fact, we're usually inundated with thousands of results for one simple search, but even then Google has made it easier to pinpoint the exact information we are looking for by highlighting snippets from relevant web pages. Or if even that is too much work, you can always just ask your question to Alexa, who will search the internet for you.

The examples are endless, but here are a few more ways digital media has enhanced our personal lives:

- **Communication options.** There is a spectrum of convenient communication platforms that allow us to maintain relationships and to communicate at varying attention levels. For instance, FaceTime requires our full attention, and it captures the rich details of facial expressions and vocal inflection that enhance a message and provide a greater sense of intimacy. On the other hand, texts, emails, and social media direct messaging require very little attention. We can quickly send a message without disrupting other tasks, and we can manage multiple conversations at a time.
- **Social connection.** Similar to the above example, social media platforms provide a sense of connection to friends, family, and

acquaintances. It's much easier to scroll through your feed in order to keep up with people's lives than it is to make phone calls to everyone every day. Social media has significantly enlarged our social circle and made it easier to support one another through times of crisis and celebration.

- **Documentation of key moments.** Built-in cameras on our phones and other handheld devices make it easy to take still photos or videos of events both big and small. With phone storage, cloud-based storage, social media archives, and online photo books, we can retrieve and share these memorable moments. We are able to capture much more of our daily lives than ever before.
- **DIY projects.** YouTube and Pinterest have brought about the popularity of do-it-yourself projects, allowing people to explore new hobbies and do home renovations on their own.
- **Dating.** Social media and a host of dating apps make it much easier to meet people who align with your interests and get to know them casually and remotely before ever seeing them in person.
- **Entertainment.** Streaming services let us curate a list of music, podcasts, movies, and shows based on our interests and past selections. Similarly, we can access more books than ever with apps that allow us to purchase/download a digital copy.
- **Banking.** Mobile banking apps allow us to view our current balance, pay bills, and make immediate transactions.
- **Transportation.** Applications like Waze and Google Maps track our location to give up-to-the-minute directions to help us get where we want to go and to navigate around accidents, construction delays, and other challenges.
- **News.** We get news updates throughout the day so that we can keep up with the latest news from anywhere.
- **Shopping.** Ads are personalized to fit our interests, and online shopping makes it easy to shop for groceries, clothes, electronics, appliances, and other merchandise—literally *anything*—from the comfort of home. We can also track the

progress of our packages in real time to find out when they will arrive.

- **Remote access.** As more smart appliances emerge, it's increasingly common to control them from our handheld devices. This includes heating and cooling systems, security systems, overhead garage doors, and a host of other appliances that can be managed from a remote location.
- **Health monitoring.** Digital devices allow us to track the number of steps we take in a day along with other important information such as heart rate, blood pressure, and even posture. This gives people more access to their own health information and empowers them to make more positive choices. It's also easy to share this information with a physician, who can offer medical care based on a more complete picture of a person's health.

Educational

Another obvious sector of our lives that has been enhanced by digital media is education. As already discussed, this isn't an uncritical celebration of all ed tech, nor is it an argument that digital technology can ever replace the personal care and skilled instruction of teachers. However, as we've seen in recent years, particularly at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital media is a useful tool that can be extremely beneficial when used in conjunction with smart lesson planning and individualized instruction. Obviously, the experiences of both teachers and students varied tremendously during the pandemic. While some schools were already offering instruction either partially or fully online and had already worked out many of the kinks, others were forced to shift abruptly to a virtual learning format, and they struggled with things like stable Wi-Fi, student access to digital

devices, Zoom fatigue, homework overload, confusion regarding class concepts or instructor feedback, and feelings of isolation.

However, at the end of the 2020 school year, following the shift to virtual learning, many students expressed mostly positive feelings about their online experiences. For instance, this article from *Inside Higher Ed* reports that when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement "I could learn at least as much as I did in face-to-face meetings," the average response on a seven-point scale was 4.89, indicating that they agreed that online education was effective, but there were some things that could be improved (Lederman). Similarly, this study out of Hong Kong points to several educational advantages of virtual learning, including safety, convenience, flexibility, and greater access to resources (Dung).

Because of the pandemic, our reliance on education technology has grown tremendously. In March 2020, UNESCO reported that 1.3 billion students (80% of students worldwide) were affected by school closures during the pandemic and that "all countries are scaling up distance education modalities based on different mixes of technologies" (Chang & Yano). Even as schools have reopened to once again allow face-to-face learning, education technology has continued to expand ("Ed Tech"), and more instructors are utilizing a hybrid approach that leverages the benefits of digital media (Seeley). Though not all populations have benefited equally from the advances in education technology (see "The Bad and the Ugly" below), there have been some positive effects on student learning as a result of digital media:

- **Remote coursework.** Courses can be completely or partially online. In fact, entire degree programs are built around online courses that are designed to give students flexibility, so they can make progress toward their diploma or degree while also working or taking care of their families. Students can take courses from universities hundreds of miles away. They can travel while keeping up with coursework. Or they can stay

home to recover from illness without falling behind.

- **Independent and flexible learning.** Online learning management systems like Canvas and Moodle provide a space where professors can communicate with students about assignments, provide additional resources, and post grades. So students have a way to access information and take more control of their own learning. There are also platforms like Coursera or Skillshare that allow subscribers to learn a variety of topics completely online and at their own pace.
- **Access to resources.** Teachers can put important course resources—syllabi, rubrics, assignment sheets, study guides, instructional videos—online for students to access on their own time. This helps students take ownership of their own learning and review important materials that will help them be successful in class.
- **Enhanced participation.** Many online learning platforms also have discussion boards, which give every student an equal opportunity to participate in course discussions. This can be useful for remote learning as well as in-class discussions, where some students are less likely to speak up.
- **Collaboration.** With digital platforms like Google Workspace, students can collaborate in real time on the same document. They can also teleconference while they work on the document together, or they can leave comments for one another to be addressed later. Many teleconferencing tools, such as Zoom or Kaltura, allow students to be put into breakout groups so they can work together during class time.
- **Organization.** Another benefit of cloud-based platforms is that documents are continuously saved—so students can't "lose" a document they were working on, and they can always revert back to a previous version. The capability to create folders and subfolders is also an important advantage of digital media that helps with organization and overall workflow.
- **Engagement.** So many of the digital tools and applications that teachers use as part of their lessons or as part of student

homework are meant to engage their interest (Hesse). Videos, slides, games, and other interactive tools make it easier to present information in a way that will fit different learning styles, capture students' attention, and provide opportunities for students to practice important skills and concepts.

- **Online tutoring.** Students who need additional help outside of the classroom can send and receive emails, post a comment on Canvas, or teleconference with their instructor or a tutor.
- **Job training.** More recently, digital technology has evolved to allow instructors to provide remote labs for students in nursing, engineering, and other STEM courses (Pegasus Innovation Lab). From the convenience of home, students can access industry-grade equipment to perform experiments and measurements. Virtual reality tools have also been used to help train doctors and surgeons in a low-stakes environment. A recent study indicates that surgeons who are trained with VR software perform better than surgeons trained using more traditional methods (Blumstein).

Professional

Digital media has also had a significant impact on people's professional lives as well as the ways in which professional organizations conduct business. Many of the personal and educational benefits we've already listed also apply to the professional realm. For instance, just as students have access to remote learning options, the advancements in digital technology have provided more opportunities for professionals to work remotely. In fact, following the pandemic, when so many businesses had to switch to a remote model in order to survive, many have continued to offer fully or partially remote positions because they provide flexibility that is conducive to a healthier work-life balance and facilitate higher levels of productivity (New Jersey Institute

of Technology). Similarly, digital tools have provided more opportunities for collaboration and communication, often streamlining workflow and allowing for more participation from colleagues and clients. Another similarity is the way that digital media has expanded the job market. Though many positions are still fully in-person, requiring employees to live nearby, remote positions allow employees to work for a company from anywhere in the world, which means they have more job options and more control over their preferred work environment.

Let's focus on the benefits of digital technology that are specific to the professional realm:

- **Job hunting.** People don't look at the want ads in the newspaper anymore. It's much easier to find a variety of relevant job postings on company websites, social media, and employment websites like Indeed or Zip Recruiter. With these specialized services, you can put in the type of job you are looking for in addition to other search parameters and then scroll through a long list of results. Often, these services will send email alerts when new relevant jobs have been posted. And they make it easy to upload your résumé and/or fill out an application for the job(s) of your choice. It's a win-win for both employees and employers, who can connect with more people and increase their chances of finding the right fit. The use of digital media to search for prospective jobs has also increased the odds of an employee leaving their employer for one that seems more beneficial (Bizzi).
- **Networking.** With professional networking apps like LinkedIn as well as online webinars, certifications, and conferences, individuals can quickly grow their professional network of acquaintances throughout an industry, which helps them acquire resources, expert advice, job recommendations, and more. It's also easier to develop your résumé through some of these online experiences and to leverage online resources (such as LinkedIn or your own professional website) to

enhance your own visibility to other professionals and potential employers in your field.

- **Training.** In addition to online certifications and videos sponsored by experts in your industry, job training has also expanded to include online training manuals, short email updates, videos, and even interactive tools that streamline the process, engage employees, and increase employee understanding and follow-through.
- **Communication.** It's obviously easier to send your coworker a quick text than it is to walk to her office down the hall. It's also much faster to send the president of your company a well-worded email with progress updates, questions, or concerns than it is to call his or her secretary and try to schedule an appointment. Digital media has streamlined the communication process and in many ways has helped flatten hierarchies that used to make collaboration and communication more difficult.
- **Organization.** Not only can you send emails, participate in instant message chats, or teleconference with your colleagues and clients in order to get work done and foster stronger social connections, but digital media has also made it possible to access things like health insurance information, time sheets, pay stubs, time-off request forms, company policies, and so on. In fact, many organizations have their own mobile app where these resources and more can be easily organized and accessed.
- **Marketing.** As discussed in the first chapter about commercialization, digital media has had a significant impact on a company's ability to market directly to target audiences and to identify new markets where they might expand. Though there is more competition, it's also more effective and often cheaper to advertise on social media or to cultivate an email list of potential customers who have expressed an interest in a particular product or service. Also, while the role of marketing experts and content strategists is more important than ever,

it's also more common for other employees throughout an organization to participate in branding and social media marketing.

- **Market expansion.** Finally, digital technology has provided more opportunity for market growth as companies use digital platforms to reach potential customers in other areas. With the right infrastructure in place, they can also use digital platforms to provide enhanced customer service, facilitate online ordering, track package shipments, and store customers' buying histories and preferences for future marketing.

Civic

One final—but maybe the most important—area to consider when it comes to the benefits of digital media relates to civic engagement. Lots of recent examples come to mind in which relief organizations were able to rally immediate and substantive support for people in the midst of crisis. For instance, at the time of this writing, CARE.org is actively raising money for humanitarian crises in Ukraine, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yemen; for earthquake victims in Haiti; for Hurricane Ida victims in the U.S.; for Syrian and Burmese refugees; for people in Somalia suffering from food insecurity; and more. With a few clicks, people can read updates about these tragedies, build empathy for people who are suffering, and donate money to aid in relief efforts. Similar organizations include TechSoup, Idealist.org, and Kiva.org.

Obviously, as we will explore later in this chapter, there is an "ugly" side to civic engagement, and it usually revolves around political division. However, at its core, politics isn't really about taking sides. It's about communication, cooperation, and problem-solving in order to function as a community—whether at the local, state, national, or global level. It means being open to understanding

the needs of other people in your community and taking on a participatory role to help meet those needs. In that case, digital media has become an essential part of the process to facilitate public awareness and support for a variety of important issues we wouldn't have known about otherwise.

Clay Shirky is a strong advocate for the potential of digital media to help in the fight against injustices of all kinds. In his book *Cognitive Surplus*, he argues that following educational and industrial advancements, people have spent less time working and far more time watching television—a national average of two hundred billion hours each year (10). That's the "surplus" where the book got its name. However, the good news, according to Shirky, is that people are increasingly using digital media platforms for productive purposes, including social justice and civic philanthropy. He cites fundraising efforts for disabled youth, websites (including the ones listed above) that focus on development and relief efforts, coordinated efforts to pick up trash on the street, online communities of patients who can connect with and support other people with the same illness, and a Facebook campaign to support women's rights in southwestern India in the face of fundamentalism and oppression. Such profound opportunities exist when we see the potential of digital media beyond personal entertainment and satisfaction:

- Increased awareness of social issues around the world
- Heightened sense of empathy for people in crisis, particularly through pictures, videos, testimonials, and so on
- More capabilities to organize support and relief efforts
- Increased financial participation as well as other forms of support from people around the world
- Greater sense of community and goodwill
- More resources that make a tangible difference in people's lives

As a brief conclusion to this section on the benefits of

digital media, it should be clear that technology has so much potential to free up our time, foster deeper relationships, enhance our learning and productivity, and engage in civic activities that make a difference in our communities. On a fundamental level, digital media has a profound influence on who we can be and what we can do, and depending on how and why we leverage these technologies, the difference can be extremely positive.

The Bad and the Ugly: The Downsides of Digital Spaces

But. Realistically, there is always a "but" when it comes to digital media because the reality doesn't usually match the ideal. For every benefit listed in the previous section, we could flip it on its head to expose the negative consequences. Digital media allows for more civic engagement? It also provides a space for people to argue, spouting their own perspectives and priorities without listening to others. It allows for more engaging educational tools? It also pulls students' attention away when they should be listening in class. It facilitates more social connections? It also hinders in-person communication and often brings about feelings of isolation when we scroll through other people's social media posts. And so on.

This section is not intended to be exhaustive. It would take a whole separate textbook to tease out all of the negative implications of digital media and its pervasiveness in our everyday lives. Anyway, as already stated, the point of having a critical perspective isn't to be negative. The point is to have a fuller understanding of *both* the advantages and disadvantages so that you can make informed decisions about—and potentially put limits on—your own digital media use. To that end, we'll look broadly in this section at three important areas where unrestricted, imprudent

use can have the most damaging effects: social, emotional, and cognitive.

Social

It's ironic that social media and so many other platforms that are intended to help us forge new connections, maintain relationships, and participate in larger civic activities and conversations could do so much damage in those very same areas. In this instance, the word "social" is about more than your "social life," the people that you spend time with, or that part of your personality that makes you want to (or not want to) interact with other people. In this context, "social" is about the way that relationships are organized in society—how we are *taught* to interact with other people and how those interactions become central in our lived experiences. For instance, learning is largely a social process—it's built around your interactions with your parents, your teachers, and your peers, and without those relationships, you wouldn't learn. By the same token, all communication is inherently social; it takes place between people with the shared goal of reaching a common understanding. Digital media is a communication tool, which means it's largely a social tool. It mediates our interactions with other people, and while it often enhances those interactions and our abilities to relate to other people, sometimes it makes things worse.

- **Distractions.** An obvious place to start might be the fact that many people become so dependent on their phones or iPads as forms of entertainment or distractions during their downtime that they can't tear themselves away during in-person conversations or activities that merit their full attention. Maybe you've been to dinner with someone who spent half of the meal looking at their phone, which hindered any conversation you might have had. People do the same thing

during class, walking down the street, standing in line at the grocery store, during commercial breaks, and even while driving. The habit of being constantly engaged with our phones prevents us from engaging meaningfully in things that are happening right in front of us. Instead of enriching our social interactions, our reliance on digital media depletes them.

- **Posturing.** Certainly, the argument can be made that all of our social interactions are performances and that we are constantly constructing (and reconstructing) our identities. We could also debate postmodern theories about the very existence of a core identity and whether any of us have a "true" core self. The point is that social media and other web-based platforms can further complicate—or even subvert—our identities. We spend so much time curating the perfect pictures of ourselves online—in a new bathing suit, at a fun or picturesque vacation spot, with our smiling family, or at the table with a gourmet meal in front of us—that we sometimes lose sight of or fail to appreciate the complex reality. For instance, we probably all know people online who constantly post selfies, and they aren't usually candid, spontaneous photos. Chances are a single photo was carefully staged and that it took several minutes and several versions of the picture before they captured the "right" one. And even then, they probably put a filter over the photo to make their skin brighter or their eyes bigger—to cover up any potential flaws. Their profile presents a false identity, and while their posts might be impressive, they don't enhance social connectedness. Quite the opposite, they create barriers designed to shield parts of ourselves and our lived experiences so people won't really get to know us. What's more, so much energy and focus often goes into constructing our ideal selves online that it gets harder to distinguish what's "real."

- **Oversharing.** In contrast to the point above, sometimes people don't spend enough time filtering the content they put online. Much of their feed is inappropriate and off-putting because

they divulge too much personal information, they give too many political opinions that create tension, or they post jokes that are crude and offensive. Once more, the result of oversharing online isn't usually deeper relationships. It creates dissociations as their online "friends" block their feed or unfriend them altogether.

- **Narrow-mindedness.** Despite the fact that digital media has created more access than ever before to different perspectives and experiences, the reality is that instead of being sensitive to and reflective of other viewpoints that might expand their own ways of seeing and thinking, many people become more entrenched in their own opinions. In some ways, this is a consequence of personalization and the [recommendation algorithms](#) designed to "learn" what type of content people like and provide "super curated content" that fits those preferences and will therefore keep people online for longer periods of time (Farrar). Much of their online experience becomes an echo chamber in which their own viewpoints are constantly validated as more accurate and more virtuous. They learn to view opposing opinions as "wrong" and refuse to engage. In fact, Farrar points out that recommendation algorithms "can also spread misinformation, disinformation and propaganda.... Content that is emotionally charged tends to go viral because a lot of users engage with the content. There are also reports that users get sucked into radicalization rabbit holes as algorithms serve up more and more extreme content."

- **Uncivil discourse.** On a related note, though digital media provides the opportunity for productive dialogue about important issues, that's often not what happens. As noted above, some people refuse to meaningfully engage, which means that instead of trying to understand new perspectives, they often use online platforms to push their own opinions (backed by "credible" news sources that align with their political perspectives). Meanwhile, they are dismissive of and

downright hateful toward other people, which is a common online phenomenon called the disinhibition effect, in which "people self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensely" when they are online (Suler). This might also be a good place to mention common occurrences like social media shaming, cyberbullying, trolling to intentionally create discord (GCFGlobal), and even creating "bot-driven" social media accounts that "manipulate" voters with "animosity-stoking messages" (Baraniuk). None of these practices are about mutual understanding or social justice. They are intended to diminish other people while solidifying our own social standing and self-validation.

- **Predatory behaviors.** We can't explore the dark side of digital media without recognizing the dangers that lurk online. Wreaking havoc on our sense of "community" are the hackers, stalkers, identity thieves, scammers, child predators, and human traffickers who have truly malicious intentions and can leverage the affordances of digital media to harm other people. Our digital experiences are always laced with concerns for privacy and security because of the dangers that exist.

- **Inequalities.** Finally, despite predictions that digital media would promote equality for various minority groups who, in theory, can participate equally in digital spaces where their voices can be heard, digital media has largely reinforced the status quo. For one thing, the digital divide continues to be a significant problem in which populations of a lower socioeconomic status don't have constant access to digital devices (van Dijk). As a result of this inexperience, they don't have the digital literacies that are necessary to navigate the digital realm and participate meaningfully in online spaces. What's more, the pervasiveness of online echo chambers that separate people into like-minded groups based on similarities in political perspective, class, race, ethnicity, and so on has reinforced the status quo in online spaces by limiting people's social network and therefore limiting their access to resources

and opportunities (Dong et al.). There's also the reality that while we're all being monitored on a daily basis by algorithms trained to predict our behavior and "control access to resources" (Eubanks 10), the algorithms themselves are biased, often perpetuating social inequalities: "Marginalized groups face higher levels of data collection when they access public benefits, walk through highly policed neighborhoods, enter the health-care system, or cross national borders. The data acts to reinforce their marginality when it is used to target them for suspicion and extra scrutiny" (Eubanks 11). Cade Metz makes a similar point in a *New York Times* article about [AI machines created by and for dominant groups](#) that further marginalize women and people of color.

Emotional

In conjunction with the negative social effects of digital media listed above, many studies have demonstrated that overexposure to certain types of content on digital media can have negative emotional effects. Again, it's all about context. More positive experiences on digital media can have positive emotional effects, but it's probably easy to overlook the significant emotional effects that come from our more negative experiences.

- **Addiction.** It's easy to see how habit-forming things like social media and video games can be when usage goes unchecked. In 2018, the [World Health Organization](#) listed digital gaming disorder as a medical condition. Other studies have compared the addictiveness of social media and iPhone use to that of cigarettes, drugs, and gambling. A [recent blog article by Harvard University](#) explains that, like other addictive behaviors, positive digital media experiences trigger the release of dopamine, a chemical in our brain that invokes

feelings of pleasure and motivates us to repeat certain behaviors (Haynes). Over time, a "reward pathway" forms. The neurons in our brain respond more quickly and intensely to a specific stimulus. According to the Harvard article, "Every notification, whether it's a text message, a 'like' on Instagram, or a Facebook notification, has the potential to be a positive social stimulus and dopamine influx." It's the reason people check their phones so often, struggle to delay responding to a text, spend hours focused on a screen, and get so upset when they are apart from their devices (Hernandez and Howerton). What's more, it's by design that users react this way (Andersson).

- **Feelings of isolation.** For many people, the more time they spend on social media, the *more* isolated and disconnected they feel. A recent study found that young adults ages 19–32 experienced deeper feelings of isolation when they had higher levels of social media use (Primack et al.). This might be because they were interacting with people online and in fairly superficial ways instead of having enriched in-person interactions. Additionally, feelings of isolation can stem from scrolling through pictures of other people's seemingly perfect lives and thinking our own lives pale in comparison.

- **Anxiety/depression.** The blog post by the Harvard research technician referenced above estimates that on average, all of the tapping and swiping that we do with our electronic devices adds up to 2,600 touches per day (Hernandez and Howerton). In conjunction with the compulsion to constantly be on our phones so that we can respond to the latest message, watch the latest viral video, and generally be "in the loop" comes a higher level of anxiety. Anxiety also increases as a result of our shift in perspective when we use digital media, focusing more on how other people will perceive us and constantly seeking their positive evaluation (Annoni et al.). This leads to nervousness, fear of disapproval, and hostility from others. There are also connections between digital media use and

[problems sleeping](#) (Ellis) as well as other mental health problems like [depression](#) and lower levels of self-esteem (Miller). This is particularly true for people who constantly encounter negative content online or for victims of cyberbullying.

- **Work-life balance difficulties.** While digital media has made many of our professional tasks easier through handheld devices and cloud-based systems, it has also made it [more difficult](#) to set clear boundaries between "work" and "home" (Ciolfi and Lockley). Through email, texts, and social media, we are in constant connection with colleagues from work as well as our family and friends, but it's exhausting and debilitating to be available all the time to everyone. It's also more difficult to get out of "work mode" when we come home, which can lead to fatigue, burnout, and stress.

- **Other addictive behaviors.** We've already mentioned the addiction to digital media itself, but another negative aspect of digital media is that it facilitates other addictive behaviors, such as [pornography](#) (Love et al.) and [gambling](#) (Kruger) addictions. While a person could certainly engage in these behaviors without digital technology, handheld devices and laptops make these activities much more accessible, leading to an increase in the prevalence and severity of these types of addictions.

Cognitive

Obviously, the negative effects we've listed above are cause for concern, but there's also something uniquely terrifying about the ways digital technology has affected our cognition—the ways that we perceive, process, and respond to information. Some recent studies have used neuroimaging to demonstrate that the very structure of our brains has changed, leading to a decline in cognitive

function. For instance, a six-week study of participants in online roleplaying found that gamers who disengaged from the real world to focus on virtual gameplay had a significant decline in the gray matter in their orbitofrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps with sensory integration, participation in learning, impulse control, and decision-making (Zhou et al.)—after just six weeks! Though the cognitive effects of digital media are complex, and research is continuing, some of the negative effects of frequent use, especially in young children whose brains are still forming, are startling.

- **Diminished attention span.** With so many digital technologies and online platforms, combined with our own tendencies to multitask across multiple devices, respond instantly to notifications, skim web pages, and follow hyperlinks, research shows that our attention spans are diminishing (Purcell et al.). We struggle to stay focused on a single task, switching from one digital task to another every 19 seconds on average (Yeykelis et al.). A meta-analysis of 41 studies demonstrates a significant reduction in cognitive ability because of media multitasking (Firth et al.). Over time, people are more easily distracted and less able to concentrate for extended periods of time or think deeply about a topic. Similarly, we are less likely to engage with longer, more complicated texts, more likely to skim instead of read, and less engaged by ideas that are represented in alphabetic text than by pictures, sounds, and videos. One longitudinal study has found a direct connection between attentional deficits in younger adolescents and multitasking activities on electronic devices (Baumgartner et al.). Other experts question whether the increase in digital media has resulted in lower reading scores (Sparks). There are also the indirect effects of devices that take time away from homework, class engagement, and social activities.
- **Decline in memory.** No longer do we need to memorize information about history, geography, math, and so on. Information is constantly accessible at the click of a button,

which means that we are far more reliant on digital devices to store this information instead of our own brains. For instance, this study by Sparrow et al. found that because of Google and other search engines, people are more likely to remember where to find the information they need than the actual information. It's a form of "cognitive offloading" that some might argue frees up intellectual space for other tasks and ideas, though it seems just as likely that our collective memory about information that at one time was considered foundational to our lived experience is quickly eroding. A more recent study shows that while many people are adept at finding information online, we are less likely to commit the information to long-term memory when we use digital devices (Dong and Potenza). What's more, the practice of searching the internet for answers becomes habit-forming, so we are more likely to ask Google when we are confronted with a challenge than think it through for ourselves (Wang et al.).

- **Developmental delays.** Depending on the amount of screen time and the content they watch, infants and toddlers can experience developmental delays, particularly those associated with language acquisition and executive function (Anderson and Subrahmanyam).

- **Sleep disruptions.** Finally, digital media can have a negative effect on our sleep because the blue light inhibits the production of melatonin, which helps us fall asleep (Gratton). Over time, it can disrupt our normal sleep cycles, leading to lower quality of sleep and other related problems like fatigue, difficulty focusing, difficulty with problem-solving, and so on.

It's worth pointing out that not all studies confirm the negative cognitive effects of digital media. Some, like this one, show that the correlation between social media use and cognition is insignificant (Lara and Bokoch). Other studies, like this one, point to positive effects of gaming and other online activities on intelligence (Sauce et al.). The point of this section is that not all digital media experiences are positive and that overexposure to digital technology can have a variety of negative effects. It's important to be intentional to understand our goals when we engage with digital media, evaluate the effects, and set healthy boundaries. We focus on how you can engage critically with digital technologies in the next section.

Activity 2.1

The information presented in the previous two sections really only brushes the surface of the potentially positive and negative effects of digital media on our lives. Review these lists again, and either on your own or as part of a

group, see what items you might be able to add to the list. These might be based on your own personal experiences or additional research that you have done.

For each negative effect listed—both here in the chapter and on the list of items you created—consider ways to mitigate these negative effects. What specific things can we do? This might include personal choices and limitations as well as public policies and educational/professional practices.

Setting Your Own Goals and Boundaries

Hopefully, it's clear that digital media affords incredible opportunities that benefit our personal and professional lives as well as society as a whole, but those benefits aren't automatic nor unqualified. If we are not intentional about our practices, digital media can have significant negative consequences. This last section of the chapter is about setting your own intentions. While there are some general guidelines when it comes to digital media use, it's really up to you as an individual to understand your purpose(s) when you engage with digital media, reflect on the various effects, and maintain healthy boundaries.

Below is a list of factors that are fundamental to the ways that you engage with digital media. Each one has a profound impact—either positive or negative—on your own social/emotional health as well as the health of the people with whom you engage. Each one offers the opportunity for you to think critically about your personal goals and social ethics so that you can make positive choices in all the digital spaces you navigate.

- **Big-Picture Goals**
  - Identify your purpose(s). When you engage in digital media, whether you are receiving or sending information, you always have a purpose. Is it to get specific information? To make social connections? To network with other professionals? To market your business? To relax and enjoy a show or a video game with your friends? Take time to reflect on what your objectives are when you engage in digital media activities.
  - Identify positive experiences. Based on the objectives you identified above, which ones do you feel are generally successful? Why? What are some of the unexpected benefits you've experienced?
  - Identify negative experiences. Now consider the objectives that aren't being fully met based on your current practice. Why do you think that is? What are some of the negative consequences you hadn't expected? What are some adjustments you can make to diminish these negative outcomes?
  - Set time limits. This one is tricky, since so much of our work lives (and school lives) take place in the digital realm. Sometimes it's difficult to control how much screen time we get when we are expected to engage in digital activities for work and school. Additionally, like this *Time* article suggests, the type of content you consume online is just as, if not more, important than the amount of time you spend online (Serrano). However, considering the addictive nature of digital media and the negative emotional, social, and cognitive effects discussed in the previous section, it's a good idea to limit your screen time, particularly when it comes to personal use (e.g., scrolling your social media feed or binging Netflix). See if you can identify a reasonable time limit per day or per week that allows you to enjoy these activities while still making room for other types of activities.

◦ Set timing limits. This is a bit different than the last one about limiting the amount of time you spend in front of a screen. This is about *timing*—establishing situations when it is appropriate and beneficial to be on digital media (e.g., when you are doing homework or relaxing after dinner) and when it is inappropriate (e.g., during dinner with your family or while you are driving). This category also requires you to be discerning about which types of digital media are appropriate in different contexts. While you are doing your homework, it's completely appropriate for you to use Google Drive or some other homework app that has been assigned. It's not the time to respond to a bunch of texts, check your TikTok feed, or watch Netflix. This category is about having discipline to limit certain types of digital media activities when they distract you from your key focus/purpose.

- **Content You Consume**
  ◦ Make a list of the digital spaces where you receive information—websites, social media apps, and maybe even texts and emails that you receive from businesses and news organizations.
  ◦ What types of digital content do you consume regularly?
  ◦ Which types of content and digital spaces have a positive effect because they help you reach key objectives or they create positive feelings and connections?
  ◦ Which types of content and digital spaces have a negative effect because they distract you from key objectives or they are detrimental to your social/emotional health in some way?
  ◦ How can you eliminate the negative content? Admittedly, it might not always be possible to disassociate from content that inspires negative feelings. For instance, homework can be stressful, but it wouldn't be beneficial if you stopped paying attention to emails from your professor or the assignment listings in Canvas. However,

there are probably places where you can make a break. Unsubscribe to spam emails that fill up your inbox. Break away from social media groups that are toxic in some way. And maybe take a second look at the news feed you subscribe to or the friends on your social media who are consistently negative.

- How can you balance the information you receive? Particularly when it comes to news articles, blog posts, and even scientific studies, we tend to accept what we read online as fact. However, as we'll discuss in the next chapter, there is always another side to every issue. Do you research the information you receive online to verify it from more than one credible source? Is the information you receive balanced and accepting of different viewpoints? Do you purposely engage with people who have different experiences and perspectives than you so that you can challenge your own biases?

- **Content You Share**
  - Make a list of all of the digital spaces where you share information—websites and social media apps as well as texts and email, if applicable. Also include places where you regularly make comments on other people's posts.
  - What types of content do you regularly share? Work- or school-related information? Posts about family and personal experiences? How-to videos?
  - What types of information do you share that have a positive effect on yourself and others? Consider the type of content as well as the tone that you use. Which messages help you meet the underlying objectives you listed above? Which ones demonstrate respect and care for people both inside and outside of your audience?
  - What types of information do you share that have a negative effect on yourself and others? This is where you have to take an honest look at your recent messages and consider whether they align with your underlying digital

media goals and personal ethics or whether they undermine those things because you are uncivil, disrespectful, or careless toward people both inside and outside of your audience.

- How can you eliminate the content you share that has a negative effect, either on your own reputation and mental health or on the well-being of others? Maybe consider first what might trigger some of your more negative messages and what might be a healthier, more productive way to resolve those issues. In some cases, it might help to disconnect completely from digital spaces that have become toxic.
- How can you be even more thoughtful about the messages that you share? This might have to do with verifying "facts" by multiple credible sources, or it might be more about being considerate of people whose experiences and perspectives are different from yours.

Probably the most important part of engaging critically with digital media is to reflect honestly and deeply about your own practices, to consistently assess your experiences and outcomes, and to be willing to make effective adjustments and set healthy boundaries. It's also important to take a "both/and" approach to digital media. It's not entirely good, and it's not entirely bad. It's complex, imbued with *both* positive *and* negative effects that can't be easily untangled. But you should still try, and you should consider what it might look like for you to embrace an approach to digital media that is both critically sensitive and appropriately moderate. Though it might seem insignificant in comparison to some of the negative consequences mentioned earlier, gaining control over your own practices will have a big impact on you and set a positive example for those with whom you come in contact.

Review the list of questions above, reflect on your own experiences and practices, and jot down some answers based on your initial impressions/reactions.

Then spend a few days (or maybe longer) tracking your digital experiences, including the digital spaces that you visit, your purpose, the amount of time that you spend on a screen each day, the types of content that you consume, the types of content that you share, and your feelings about these experiences and their effects.

This type of self-study is a great way to clearly see what your digital habits are and which practices might be problematic. At the end of the study, compare your data with your initial reactions and write a reflection about what surprises you and what types of changes you could make to create more positive digital media experiences.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the myth of the digital panacea? What are some examples of this mindset, and why is it problematic?
2. This chapter explained that *critical* doesn't mean

negative. What does it mean to think critically about our digital media use?

3.   The section about "The Good" effects of digital media begins with a couple of examples of how specific practices have changed—and become more efficient—as a result of digital media. What other examples can you think of? Is it always better to be more efficient? Explain.

4.   For you personally, which benefits of digital media (either from the list in the chapter or that you created on your own) are most significant? Explain.

5.   For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic altered the way that they interacted with other people through digital technology. Reflect on your own experiences, including both the positive and negative effects.

6.   According to the chapter, what does "posturing" mean when it comes to social media? How can this have a negative effect on both the person posting and the people who see these types of posts?

7.   What are the differences (if any) between promoting a false, overly positive image of ourselves online and managing our reputation and the content that we post in positive and responsible ways?

8.   How would you define a digital space that is "toxic"? What does it look like?

9.   The end of this chapter advocates a "both/and" perspective of digital media. What does that mean? What examples can you think of?

10.   What is an echo chamber? In what ways might it have a negative personal effect?

11.   Some research has shown that media companies

[purposely leverage the addictive qualities of digital media](#) to increase people's screen time and their own advertising revenue. Is that ethical? Should there be more regulations in place to protect people's mental and cognitive health?

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3. Screens, Spins, and Perceptions of "Reality"

We are living in the information age, characterized by our digital communication tools and our constant and instantaneous access to information. Ironically, that doesn't always mean we're more informed. Surely, you've learned by now that just because you read something on the internet doesn't mean it is true. Digital literacy is largely about learning how to navigate through the infinite amount of information online—full of agendas, spins, willful ignorance, and outright lies—to find the answers you're looking for and to discern what information is credible and what isn't.

The downside of the web's infinite capacity for information sharing is just that. It's *infinite*, and *anybody* can contribute. There is no gatekeeper or quality control specialist who makes sure that information posted on the internet is accurate. A *Forbes* article published in 2003 reported that roughly 53% of Americans believe that the internet is "reliable and accurate" ("For 53%"). Mind you, that was before the iPhone was invented, before it was common to have constant access to the internet through our phones and other handheld devices. Even then, as the article reports, internet use among average Americans was climbing, while their confidence in online information was on the decline.

Now compare those findings with a more recent Gallup poll from 2018. This survey is a little more complex, as it doesn't lump all online information into a single category. Instead, it focuses more specifically on Americans' perception of the news media, reporting that 62% of respondents believe that much of the news they receive from traditional sources (television, newspaper, radio) is biased, inaccurate, and purposely misleading (Jones). Respondents were even more skeptical of the news they encountered online or on social media.

As the Gallup poll suggests, there are reasons to be wary of information you encounter online, particularly in our current political environment in which people are quick to latch onto articles and studies that seem to validate their existing beliefs while people on the other side of the aisle are quick to label it as "fake news" (University of Michigan Library). Even more complex are the screens and biases that we bring to a message, drawing from personal experiences and our unique ways of seeing and thinking, which impact how we interpret that information. As many theorists argue, the meaning of a message isn't inherent in the text itself; meaning is always found in the interpretation(s) of the receiver(s), which may or may not align with the intention of the sender.

Clearly, discerning "fact" from "fake news" is tricky business, especially in the digital realm where there is so much contradictory information, and it's sometimes difficult to know who authored (or better yet, who sponsored) the information being presented. In some instances, digital messages lack the rich details—nonverbal nuances like body language, facial expression, tone, and so on—that help us interpret a message. At other times, digital tools make it possible to enhance or completely fabricate those same details. The goal of this chapter is to dive into some of those complexities to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of "truth"—both in general and online. We'll also look at tools you can use to verify the information you encounter online and to guard yourself against the "fake news" that you might encounter.

Learning Objectives

- Consider the existence of multiple realities based

on individual experiences and personal lenses for seeing the world.

- Understand the limitations of language and the importance of listening and seeking to understand the perspectives of others.
- Gain insight into how knowledge and our certainty of reality develop.
- Gain a deeper understanding of the political spins and biases that pervade the news media and provide different versions of the truth.
- Consider the prevalence and underlying agendas of fake news.
- Consider the dangers of the echo chamber.
- Learn how to distinguish fake news, gauge source credibility, and assess your own underlying biases and attitudes that might distort the way you receive information.

Terministic Screens and Perceptions of Reality

Have you ever walked away from a conversation with a friend, feeling like it was a really positive encounter, only to discover later that your friend was upset by something that was said? It's a common phenomenon. Here's a more specific example to demonstrate the point: Let's say you pass one of your friends on the sidewalk. You're in a rush to get where you're going, so you don't stop to chat. Instead you give a little wave and say, "I'll talk to you later!" In your mind, perhaps, that was a positive exchange. You

acknowledged your friend and made plans to catch up some other time. But your friend has a different impression. Maybe they just left a job interview that didn't go well, and they're already feeling down. Or maybe, their date for tonight just canceled on them, and they're already feeling rejected. So to your friend, your quick greeting seemed halfhearted and insincere.

Misunderstandings are just that easy. Actually, they are even more prevalent when the message gets more complex and when we are communicating with people we don't know or who are different from us in a significant way. That's because all communication—both verbal and nonverbal—is subject to our individual interpretation. Every message has a text or a symbol—the thing that is actually said or the nonverbal cue that is displayed. In the above example, it's the wave and the phrase, "I'll talk to you later!" It's the part of the message that you *observe* that is clearly true because everyone else can observe it, too. All the other bystanders on the sidewalk, for instance, would agree that you said, "I'll talk to you later!" It's a fact. They would also probably agree that "talk to you later" literally means that you plan to communicate with your friend again in the future. The denotation, or the literal meaning of a text or symbol, also tends to be fairly obvious to everyone involved, though not always.

Things get tricky when you interpret what is said—the implied meaning. In other words, the person sending this message has a purpose, a meaning that they *intend* for you to receive based on their selection of symbols. But it is up to you to encode the message to arrive at that same shared meaning. All too often, we don't receive information the way that it was intended, and we arrive at a different meaning. To you, your greeting to your friend on the street meant "I care about you, but I'm too busy to talk right now." To your friend, it meant "I don't care about you that much. You're not a priority." Even more concerning is that if you don't clear up the misunderstanding, your friend will accept it as fact that you aren't as good of friends as they thought, and it will probably create a lot more misunderstandings in the future.

A good way to think about the way we interpret information is a term coined by Kenneth Burke in 1966 called our [terministic screen](#) (Stob). Burke was a philosopher and rhetorical theorist responsible for developing a deeper understanding of how people use language and the social effect that usage has. According to Burke, reality isn't something that is stable or fixed. It's in constant flux, varying from one person to another depending on their terministic screen, or the lens they use to process information. Put another way, your terministic screen is your way of seeing and thinking about the world, and it develops over time based on a complicated web of experiences and relationships. In Burke's words, a terministic screen is "a screen composed of terms through which humans perceive the world, and that direct attention away from some interpretations and toward others." Factors such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, family structure, socioeconomic status, existing beliefs, and personal biases have a complex and fundamental effect on the way that we view the world and how we receive new information.

Burke also references our use of selection, based on our terministic screen, when we send and receive information. Language is always a selection. When we describe an event, for example, it would be impossible to share every single detail about that event. We would select details that we think are important to the meaning of that event, and we would select words that we think most accurately capture those details. And by default, if we are selecting details and words to craft a message, we are automatically deselecting other details and words that don't align with our perspective. Maybe you've heard people make the argument that language is never neutral or objective. This is what they mean. All language is a selection based on individual values and perspectives.

By the same token, when we receive information, we are also selecting details we think are most important to the overall meaning, which is why you and a friend could read the same book or watch the same movie and come away with different ideas about the overall theme. The more dissimilar your background is, the more

likely it is that you will make different selections and form different interpretations. It's like that movie *What Women Want*, in which Mel Gibson's character is suddenly given the ability to read women's minds. He is confronted with the stark contrast between how he and the women around him interpret information based on their lived experiences and personal values, and over time, he begins to see things through their lens a little more clearly. Admittedly, it's an oversimplification of terministic screens, which are complex accumulations of all of our lived experiences and aspects of our identities, but it brings home the point about perspective.

Similar to Burke's concept of terministic screens are two related theories that will deepen our understanding of "interpretation"—sociocultural theory and social constructivist theory. Both theories emphasize the way that meaning is negotiated as people interact. There isn't one clear meaning that is inherent in our communication; it's always subject to interpretation based on a variety of factors. Sociocultural theory relates more to the social context of a message and how cultural and historical factors might influence meaning (Mcleod). Lev Vygotsky was particularly interested in how children develop cognitively through speech, which mediates activity and organizes information in new and culturally significant ways. According to Vygotsky, behavior is an "interweaving" of both the biological reception of external stimuli and the psychological processing of information through a sociocultural lens. In other words, communication and how to interpret meaning are things we learn through relationships with other people, and often the way that we communicate changes when we interact with different groups of people—different discourse communities (University of Central Florida). Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger emphasize the idea that all learning is "situated" within complex systems where learning is "relational," "negotiated," "dilemma-driven," and informed by "relations of power" (33, 36).

Social constructivist theory looks more at the individual within a social context—how an individual person might interpret

information based on their unique perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking and knowing. Using the social constructivist framework, "multiple realities" emerge as individuals organize and reconcile new information with their existing experiences and beliefs. Learning, therefore, is an active process as "the learner constructs his or her own knowledge" (Gipps 372). Social constructivism emphasizes the idea that, while communication is a collaboration that takes place in a social context, meanings are ultimately interpreted and internalized by an individual based on their connections and thought processes (Onore; Probst). There is still room for individual variations based on personal experiences, attitudes, and perceptions (Dweck; Powell and Driscoll). So even in the same social community with a shared communication system, one person might still interpret a message differently than someone else. In fact, chances are that two people won't understand the meaning of a message in exactly the same way.

How does all of this relate to digital media? Quite simply, digital media is often what *mediates* our communication with people. To "mediate" means to go between two things or to "facilitate interaction" (Jones and Hafner 2). Jones and Hafner point out that while we tend to think of a "medium" as being something like a computer screen or a "mass medium" like a newspaper or radio, "all human action is in some way *mediated*" (2, original emphasis). By this definition, language itself is a medium that links people together to bring about a shared understanding, but as we've already discussed, coming to that place of mutual understanding can be difficult, and that's especially true when messages are filtered through a screen, which increases the [likelihood of misunderstanding](#) (Sermaxhaj). Texts and emails offer very little by way of rich detail and contextual cues that would inform our interpretation of the message (Jones and Hafner). It's hard to know sometimes if a message is meant to be funny, sarcastic, or angry. Subtle nuances are often absent or difficult to identify. What's more, the [language of digital media has evolved at a rapid pace](#)—think about slang terms, SMS abbreviations, memes—which made it even

harder for some people to fully grasp the meaning of a message (Kleinmen). Things like font choice, pictures, videos, and charts/graphs (things that aren't available through spoken communication) can all be really helpful in adding clarity or depth to the meaning of a message, particularly when messages are crafted with readers' perspectives in mind. Even so, it's sometimes difficult to predict how a message might be misinterpreted or misconstrued, which is perhaps the biggest takeaway. It's also impossible to pinpoint which interpretation is "correct." Not every interpretation is equally valid. We're all at times guilty of jumping to (false) conclusions at times or harboring biases that distort our perception of a message. However, nobody can stand outside of their individual perspective to access the "right" meaning. Communication is about negotiating meaning through open dialogue and mutual respect. It's just as much about listening to other people's perspectives as it is sharing your own (Edwards).

Activity 3.1

Make a list of your own terministic screens—the lenses through which you interpret information based on your own experiences, values, and beliefs. Each one of us has multiple screens, perhaps as an older brother, a college student, a Christian, a parent, an American, a child of divorce, and so on.

Come up with as many parts of your identity and background experiences as you can think of and consider how each one influences the way that you attend to and interpret information. Which ones are most central to your

identity? How do they affect the way that you attend to and interpret various situations?

Underlying Agendas and Media Spins

Hopefully, it's clear by now that online communication isn't always easy. Language is often insufficient as a mediation tool that brings clarity and mutual understanding. Misunderstandings and disagreements are bound to happen, and so you might have to work a little harder to understand someone else's ideas or help someone else understand your own. What makes everything even more difficult is the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, perpetuated by economic and political agendas and media spins that add to the confusion and widen the chasm of political division. In many cases, false news stories and social media rumors have [sparked civil discord and even violence](#) as people get worked up over events that never happened or didn't happen the way they were presented (CITS, "The Danger"). Even more disheartening is that many disinformation campaigns are intentional misdirections with the [sole purpose of making money](#) (Herasimenka). It's tricky to navigate online spaces and distinguish fact from fiction, but since media stories and your interactions with other people surrounding these stories help shape your beliefs, worldviews, and relationships, having effective digital literacy means being more discerning about the stories you read and your reactions to the information you encounter.

Let's start with a fundamental principle of how knowledge develops. Obviously, we accrue "knowledge" over time based on our interactions with the world and the "evidence" that we collect. Evidence might be our own experiences and the things that we

witness firsthand, or as you might have guessed, evidence can also be secondhand based on what we learn from other sources—parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, books, news media, and so on. As we encounter new evidence that either confirms, contradicts, or extends our existing beliefs, we undergo a cognitive process of examining the evidence to either accept it as true or reject it as false. And that knowledge shapes our behaviors in specific ways. For instance, you (hopefully) brush your teeth every day (the action) based on the belief that it's good for your teeth and breath, which is probably based on firsthand experience as well as information from your parents, your dentist, and so on (the evidence). You probably never sat down and really investigated your underlying beliefs about toothpaste; your beliefs developed subconsciously over time and solidified as you encountered more consistent evidence.

The formal term for how knowledge develops over time is called "epistemology" or the study of knowledge. [This entry](#) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* examines the reason or rationale inherent in the cognitive process of adopting information as knowledge, also known as "cognitive success" (Steup and Neta). However, there are potential constraints that could lead to cognitive failure, in which we don't adopt the information as knowledge, either because of the evidence itself or because of existing beliefs/values that contradict the new information. When existing evidence contradicts existing beliefs, we experience [cognitive dissonance](#), a mental discomfort resulting from conflicting information (Kerwer and Rosman). Interestingly, the stronger our prior beliefs or the more grounded those beliefs are in our personal values, the less cognitive dissonance we experience because we are so quick to reject the new evidence. This is also known as the ["backfire effect"](#) as people "double down" on their beliefs even in the face of contradictory information (Wills).

Does that sound familiar? It might help to explain why people are so entrenched in their beliefs, why they are so quick to adopt information that confirms those beliefs, and why they are

equally quick to reject anything that conflicts. They haven't gone through the sometimes painful process of examining their current beliefs, where they come from, how valid they are, and how this new information might fit into or even change their beliefs and behaviors. However, the growing buzz about "fake news" and the idea that we are living in a "post-truth" era have created more skepticism among ordinary citizens (Schwarzenegger). However, most people are overly confident in their ability to detect fake news while believing that *other* people are fooled by media spins and fabrications (Jang and Kim). As Schwarzenegger put it in his study of media beliefs and personal use, "Users know that it is essential and socially favorable to be critical of information, but they rarely invest the energy and motivation to actually criticize it. Moreover, awareness of the need for information skepticism does not equate to being competent in critical practices."

One thing to consider is the inherent connection between bias and a person's vulnerability to fake news. Otherwise known as confirmation bias, this happens when information that we receive lines up with what we already believe—or want to believe. So we are quick to adopt that information as true. Ciampaglia and Menczer from *Scientific American* explain, "The fact that low-credibility content spreads so quickly and easily suggests that people and the algorithms behind social media platforms are vulnerable to manipulation." In fact, often salacious, emotionally charged false information spreads more rapidly than information that is true (Vosoughi et al.). Ciampaglia and Menczer go on to identify three different types of bias that cause people to latch onto fake information: 1. Cognitive bias, resulting from "tricks" the brain uses to quickly sift through large amounts of information. The shortcuts bypass the more logical methods a person might use to decipher the credibility of a source. 2. Social bias, pertaining to the people we are around and the way information is filtered through friend groups. People tend to have a more positive impression of information if it comes from people in their social circle (another form of the echo chamber). "This helps explain why so many online conversations

devolve into 'us versus them' confrontations" (Ciampaglia and Menczer). 3. Algorithm bias, utilizing what social media platforms and search engines consider to be the most compelling content for an individual user. However, the authors note, "But in doing so, it may end up reinforcing the cognitive and social biases of users, thus making them more vulnerable to manipulation" (Ciampaglia and Menczer).

There are obvious reasons to be skeptical of news sources. Even legitimate news organizations are made up of people with their own political values and beliefs, and there are external pressures from government agencies, advertisers, and interest groups that influence which stories are covered and the angles that are adopted. Going back to Burke's concept of the terministic screen, all news stories are made up of selected details and descriptions. That doesn't necessarily mean that the information provided is untrue, but it does mean that news stories aren't 100% objective. They reflect a perspective that highlights certain details while ignoring others, and these selections always relate to underlying values and beliefs.

Then there is the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, which create additional layers of confusion and chaos. The difference is about intent. Misinformation is inaccurate or misleading in some way, but it's not intentional. Some people believe the false news stories they read online and promote them as fact because they are misinformed. They have been misled in some ways, but they aren't trying to mislead others. Similarly, news outlets sometimes publish inaccurate information because they fail to verify the facts. This is particularly true following some sort of tragedy in which emotional tensions are high and news stations rush to post a story. Disinformation, on the other hand, is the intentional distortion of information or outright fabrications, often for the purpose of inciting panic, anger, or excitement. Tabloids, for instance, are known for sensationalized stories meant to grab readers' attention and manipulate their emotions with little regard for accuracy or balance. Similarly, even reputable news

organizations utilize sensational tactics to push ratings and political agendas (Vanacore). Even more scary are organizations that purposely promote fake news for the purpose of creating chaos and distractions (PBS News). This article from the Center of Information Technology and Society (CITS), gives several examples of fake news stories that have gone viral, demonstrating how easy it is (CITS, "Where Does"). In fact, Politifact.com, working with Facebook, put together a list of 330 fake or impostor news sites that either sound like legitimate news (ABCnews.com.co, for instance) or that target people whose political orientations make them less likely to question the information presented (AngryPatriotMovement.com, for example).

To make matters worse, there are two things to keep in mind. First, fact-checking sites exist to provide balanced information and help to either verify or debunk questionable information, but these organizations have their limits (CITS, "Protecting"). We've already established that "truth" isn't fixed or stable, but beyond that, when looking into the details of a situation, fact-checkers often have no legitimate source other than the politician or organization in question. They can verify what the politician *said*, but they can't verify the *accuracy* of that information. There are also inconsistencies between fact-checking sites when it comes to standards of truth or the verification process itself.

Second, even scientific studies, which are considered to be *the* standard of credibility and are used as the basis for many of our beliefs about the world, are prone to error, misinterpretation, and personal agendas. Though studies are designed intentionally to reduce bias and increase validity, no study is free from bias. They are all rooted in selections that the researchers make in terms of the study of the design, selection of participants, interpretation of the findings, and the language in reporting those findings. In fact, people often overlook the rhetorical nature of studies, in which researchers have a clear stake in promoting their own professional ethos and the importance of their findings. Furthermore, studies are all conducted and their results are interpreted by *people* who

have their own ways of seeing and thinking about the world. Not only are news sites often guilty of distorting scientific studies to suit their own agendas (Woolston), but the studies themselves are sometimes flawed because they are purposely or inadvertently set up to reach a specific conclusion (Ioannidis). That's why studies sometimes contradict one another and why they are often repeated. The more studies that come to the same conclusion, the more credible that conclusion becomes.

Activity 3.2

Find two or more different news stories reporting on the same event. These could be video reports, social media posts, or newspaper articles. The more types of sources you can collect, the better. Read/watch each one and make comparisons about their approach. Consider the details that are included as well as the language, both positive and negative, used to describe the event. How do these texts align? How do they differ? How might readers come away with different interpretations of the event based on which source they use?

If possible, see if you can find information about this event on a fact-checker site. Allsides.com, Emergent.info, FactCheck.org, or Snopes.com are all sites that try to verify information and provide balanced perspectives. What do these sites say about the event in question?

Alternatively, you might come up with your own list of details about the event that you think would need to be verified in some way. You could also come up with a list of questions that would help clarify the information you

encountered in the articles and/or that would address information that seems to be missing.

The Dangers of the Echo Chamber

Given the uncertainty surrounding the information that we encounter online, it's no wonder people are skeptical. In fact, many people are so turned off by the prevalence of fake news and political division that they avoid news media altogether (Edgerly et al.), which means that they're not informed about current events or issues, and they aren't participating in the conversations or the solutions. However, equally problematic are people who retreat to the safety of like-minded people and the (one-sided) information that supports their preexisting beliefs (also known as confirmation bias). As noted above, the more strongly people feel about particular beliefs, the less likely they are to examine the validity of those beliefs and to wrestle with conflicting evidence, no matter how valid it might be. Instead, they reflexively fall back on news sites and social media groups that validate their perspectives, and they become further entrenched in their own worldview instead of trying to understand the worldviews of others, find common ground, and negotiate solutions that are mutually beneficial.

In fact, one of the dangers of the echo chamber, besides the fact that it stifles personal growth, is that it prohibits original thinking (Pazzanese). Nobody is thinking critically or productively about the problems that exist, and even if they were, their ideas would immediately be dismissed because they don't conform to the group mentality. Instead, it leads to confirmation bias and a deepening division that encourages people to think only of themselves. The previous chapter discussed some of the

possibilities of civic engagement and progress that digital media affords. However, all too often, people are sucked into an online echo chamber that prohibits outward thinking, which can have devastating effects on public policy, random acts of violence by extremists, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. In fact, Harvard law Professor Cass Sunstein points out the discrepancy between the ideal that the internet would be a place that celebrates diverse perspectives in the spirit of democracy and reality. He cites the "Daily Me," a reference to how the echo chamber insulates us against other realities and normalizes our indulgence in personal interests, perspectives, feelings, and so on. (Pazzanese) It's the opposite of social progress, and without digital literacies that encourage self-awareness and critical thinking, things will only get worse.

What Can You Do?

Originally, this section was going to be titled "How to Spot Fake News," which is a significant aspect of digital literacy and an important countermeasure against the echo chamber mentality that actively suppresses information that isn't personally beneficial. However, like much of the information presented in this chapter suggests, the problem lies a little deeper than a checklist that you might use to discern the "credibility" of a source (though there is one provided below as a starting point). We're all predisposed in various ways to react positively or negatively to information that either reinforces or contradicts our existing beliefs. And besides, lots of credible sources contradict one another on important issues and seemingly fact-based events. To engage meaningfully with new information that you encounter—whether online or in person, on social media or in a scientific journal—first requires a little self-inventory.

For instance, when you encounter information that you

immediately reject as false, take some time to consider *why*. What is it specifically about the information that you find untrustworthy? Can you pinpoint anything in particular about the writer, the news organization, the details that are presented, the writing style? List them out, but try to resist the urge to be dismissive or argumentative. Simply list them out for yourself so you can interrogate each item. Remember first off that information can be complex, full of major and minor details. A news article might have an inaccuracy or even a misspelling, but that doesn't mean the entire article is false. Some items on your list might be valid reasons to be skeptical about the information (an underlying agenda, for instance, or a number of other articles that present conflicting information), and some aren't (because the author is loyal to a different political party, for example, or because the author is different from you in some other fundamental way). The most dangerous item on your list might be "I don't believe X because I already know Y." So then, take some time to think more deeply—and honestly—about that. How do you know Y (whatever fact or belief that stands in contradiction to the new information presented)? Where did this information come from and why do you believe it so fervently? How valid are those experiences or other sources of information? And is the evidence mutually exclusive? In other words, is it possible that while your experiences are valid, it might also be possible that other viewpoints and experiences are *also* valid? It's really not about being "right" or unraveling everything you think you know about the world. It's about thinking critically and authentically.

Peter Elbow was an English professor and essayist whose ideas about teaching writing and subverting authority in the classroom had a pivotal effect on the composition field. In his writings in the 1970s and 1980s, he advocated for the "believing game," which even then wasn't popular, as most people like to play the "doubting game" (Elbow, "The Believing Game"). In contrast to our initial gut reactions to challenge something we hear, the believing game is a call to start out *believing* what you hear. You

would look for the positives in others' ideas and consider first what it means if they are true. Of course, it doesn't mean that you have to agree with everything you hear or read, but it does open you up to engage more openly with other perspectives and to challenge yourself to see their value. As Elbow said in his 1986 book *Embracing Contradictions: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*, "The truth is often complex and...different people often catch different aspects of it." When we embrace contradictions, we begin to understand that "certainty is rarely if ever possible and that we increase the likelihood of getting things wrong if we succumb to the hunger for it."

The challenging part of self-inventory might be when you have to interrogate your reactions to information that you are inclined to believe, which you wouldn't normally question at all because it seems so obviously true. Once again, you'd think about *why*. What is it about the author, the publishing organization, the information itself, the writing style, and so on that makes it seem credible? What are the underlying beliefs and assumptions that you have that might predispose you to believe or agree with this information? Can you pinpoint where those beliefs and assumptions might come from? What if you didn't hold those underlying beliefs? What about the article might you question then? Again, it's not about undoing all of your core beliefs; it's simply an exercise in self-reflection where you think more critically about where your beliefs and attitudes come from. It might lead to some adjustments in your thinking, but the ultimate goal is self-understanding and reasoning based on logic instead of high emotion. It might also help you see that there is room for alternative viewpoints that are also logical and valid.

Of course, there are also strategies that you can use to discern the credibility of a source. A classic acronym that is easy to remember as you're assessing a source of information is the CRAAP test:

- **Currency**: Is the information up to date? Of course, this criterion would be applied differently in different situations. Some topics like medicine or technology are constantly evolving, so it would be crucial to find a source that is current. For other topics—historical information, for instance—it might be okay, even preferred, to use sources that are a bit older.

- **Relevance**: Is the information relevant to your research question? This criterion is probably more useful for students in research courses, working to piece together a compelling research paper. Too often, students use sources that only loosely connect to their topic, resulting in a paper that is choppy and hard to follow. The point is to make sure that the source you use is focused on the same research question you are asking.
- **Authority**: Who is the person that is providing this information? What authority do they have on this topic? Something that is written by a credentialed expert in a particular field will have more authority on a related topic than a journalist or blogger without that specialized knowledge. Another thing that relates to authority is the research that the source presents. Where are they getting *their* information, and are they providing those sources as hyperlinks or citations? Does their own research look sound?
- **Accuracy**: Is the information accurate? Does it make sense and align with other information you've received on this topic? It might be a red flag if the information is contrary to everything else that you've learned on this topic. Again, you'd look more closely at their source of information or the methods they used to come to a conclusion (if it's a study, for instance). Remember that a single study isn't enough to prove that the conclusion is correct. Multiple studies that all arrive at the same conclusion have more weight.
- **Purpose**: What is the intention behind the source? What does it want you to think or do? How is it using information to be persuasive? At the very least, someone who has gone through the trouble of publishing information wants to catch your attention and wants you to agree that the topic is important. As we'll discuss below, even academic studies have a rhetorical purpose beyond simply providing useful information that progresses our knowledge in a particular area. It's always helpful for you to consider the financial or political motives of

a source.

Though these guidelines don't guarantee that the information is 100% accurate, they do help you gauge the credibility of a source. You should also be on the lookout for fake news stories with these other red flags:

- URLs that are created to look similar to a more established, credible news source
- Unique information/events that aren't confirmed on other news sites
- Claims that are outlandish and provoke strong emotional reactions

Digital literacy and the quality of your digital writing hinge on your ability to navigate your way through the endless sea of online information, to distinguish credible information from fake news, to engage with other ideas, to understand the complexities of multiple realities, and to wrestle with your own attitudes and personal biases that might hold you back from genuine and productive discourse.

Activity 3.3

This section challenges you to consider the beliefs and attitudes that you have that provoke you to respond to information in certain ways. However, it can be difficult to honestly and accurately pinpoint attitudes and values. This short chapter in *Principles of Social Psychology* explains that our behaviors always stem from our underlying attitudes and beliefs (Jhangiani and Tarry). So to begin to understand

your beliefs and attitudes, it might help to begin with your behaviors. Everything that you do is informed by some sort of underlying belief. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, you brush your teeth because you believe that you won't have good dental hygiene if you don't and because you value your health.

What other examples can you come up with? Think of some of your ordinary, everyday habits related to your diet, your exercise routine (or lack thereof), the tasks at work or school that you prioritize, your evening routine, and so on. Think about the things that you do and also the things that you *don't* do. The way you spend your time and energy says a lot about the things that you believe and value. What do your daily activities say about you?

Discussion Questions

1. What is a terministic screen? How does it influence the ways that different people interpret information?
2. What does it mean that our terministic screens guide our *selections* of information as well as our *deselections*?
3. What are sociocultural theory and social constructivist theory? When it comes to language and meaning, how are the two theories similar? How are they different? How do these two theories work

together to extend your understanding of language and communication? How do they connect specifically to digital communication?

4.   How does information that conflicts with our preexisting beliefs create cognitive dissonance? What are people likely to do when they experience dissonance?

5.   What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation? How do they contribute to confusion and division?

6.   What is an echo chamber? Why do people succumb to the "Daily Me"? What are some of the dangers of this habit?

7.   What is the believing game? How can it be helpful when examining key issues?

8.   What are some ways that you can distinguish the credibility of a source?

9.   What are some key identifiers of fake news?

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4. Surveillance Capitalism

Take a second to consider the standard manila folder—not the folder icons on your computer. We're going old school for just a moment to consider the *actual* folder with its simple, clean design and distinctive color. It has a tab that peeks out on the side so that you can label the contents of the folder and therefore easily organize and retrieve information, which is especially helpful if you have a lot of different types of information spread across multiple folders.

It's a pretty simple concept, but information wasn't always organized this way, and as we'll discuss in this chapter, this type of data collection isn't always beneficial to everyone. In fact, it seems fitting that the manila folder is often considered a symbol of imperialism and oppression. Invented in the United States in the [early nineteenth century](#), manila paper originally came from a type of banana tree called acaba, which grew predominantly in the Philippines. When the United States colonized the Philippines, it took control of the acaba trade to ensure that it—not the Filipinos—would profit (Lui). The U.S. used the wood for a variety of purposes, including manila envelopes and paper.

In its most basic form, surveillance is about collecting information about people so it can be easily retrieved and analyzed. Before filing cabinets were invented in 1890, information was written in ledger books or in loose bundles of paper, which made information less accessible because it was difficult to find specific information. The [filing cabinet](#) revolutionized record management practices by making it possible to quickly retrieve a single document (Bristow). Soon, filing cabinets were a must in businesses across the country, and large storage facilities emerged with the singular purpose of securing large amounts of data. In other words, filing cabinets became foundational to the way that institutions managed

systems—and people. They were used to document identities, relationships, events, and transactions.

Now think about all of the folders out there somewhere that contain information about you—medical records, academic transcripts and other test scores, employment evaluations, bank information, credit scores, tax records. It's obvious why privacy has become such an important issue. Everyone has personal information stored in files across various institutions. Sometimes we don't even know these files exist. Rarely do we know all of the information that the files contain or how the information was collected. It's a form of institutional power because it increases our visibility (and vulnerability). Individuals are provided opportunities—or not—based on the information in their files. Data collection also has the power to control behaviors. Think about standard employment practices that require workers to clock in and out, that mandate an annual employee evaluation, that put surveillance cameras in parking lots and workstations, or that require random drug testing. These are all ways of monitoring and managing the behaviors of employees, of creating systems of rewards and punishments based on the information in a person's file.

The digital age of computers, web browsers, and cloud-based computing and data storage expanded data collection practices. It's even easier to store and retrieve vast amounts of personal data. It's also possible to collect all kinds of user information without the users' explicit knowledge. That's what "cookies" do. When you visit a website and it requires you to "accept cookies," a code is embedded in your browser's software that allows the website to collect information about your online activities and to recognize your computer when you revisit the site (Google, "How Google"). Information about your preferences, profile information, browsing history, past purchases, and even your navigation path and time spent on individual pages is collected. Cookies also allow websites to track your activities across the internet, even when you aren't on that specific website. A robust user profile is developed

about you—your interests, activities, and identifying information—all so that companies can create targeted ads and online experiences that will increase your chances of buying certain products and services.

CCTV Surveillance Notice, by Amityadav8, on Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The term "surveillance capitalism" refers to this collection of personal data for the purpose of financial gain or some other benefit related to power and control. In the introduction of *Surveillance Capitalism*, Josh Lauer and Kenneth Lipartito define surveillance capitalism as a

broad range of strategies and techniques, both formal and informal, that commercial actors—including lenders, merchants, employers, managers, service providers, and others—deploy to observe, record, predict, and control human behavior and relationships. The targets of such commercial surveillance typically include clients and customers, borrowers and buyers, staff and laborers (free and unfree), markets and competitors (5).

It's a broad definition because surveillance is so prevalent throughout our daily lives. We're reminded in many parking lots,

stores, schools, and government buildings that we are being recorded. Cameras also exist at many intersections and toll booths to ensure that people follow the rules. Many people have cameras on their doorbells and inside their homes so they can monitor the activities of visitors or maybe even their own pets or family members and prevent negative behaviors. Then there are the smartphones, smart watches, and GPS apps that track your location throughout the day. Our Siris, Alexas, and Google Assistants are listening devices that [record our dialogue](#), which can be reviewed by tech companies themselves or third-party contractors (Metz). There is even some fear that our devices are listening to our conversations when we aren't using them. For instance, [this study](#) examined 81 different Internet of Things devices and found that many of them surreptitiously transmit information to tech companies like Netflix, Amazon, and Google, even when the device isn't being used (Ren et al.).

Advancements in digital technology have made it easier than ever for organizations to secretly collect information, which has created a number of privacy concerns. This chapter explores the history of surveillance capitalism, identifies common surveillance practices, and examines how surveillance is often used not only to *predict* but also to *control* human behaviors. The chapter ends with basic guidelines for protecting your private information.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the history of surveillance and how different practices emerged over time as technologies became more advanced.
- Understand the connection between surveillance

and power.
- Consider all of the different types of surveillance practices and the types of data that organizations are able to collect based on our digital devices.
- Learn how commercialization connects with surveillance and how companies use surveillance and metadata to not only predict but influence behavior.
- Consider why surveillance is such a concern for society.
- Learn practical ways to protect your own private information.

The History of Surveillance Capitalism

As discussed in the previous section, the practice of compiling information into personal files has a long history that predates the advent of digital technology. Surveillance practices have an even longer, more complex history. Michel Foucault's 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* has had a profound influence on our understanding of surveillance practices and the social consequences throughout history. In it, Foucault traces the rise of the prison system in eighteenth-century Europe. Before prisons emerged as the standard form of punishment for criminal behavior, people who were convicted of a crime were typically subjected to some sort of public torture or punishment. For instance, criminals might be put in the pillory or in stocks in the town square, which was intended to deter future crime from the individual as well as everyone else in town. When prisons emerged, however, punishment shifted from being mostly physical to being mostly

psychological. Within the confines of the prison, every aspect of the prisoner's life was regimented, monitored, and controlled.

The panopticon is what made surveillance possible. Defined by its circular structure and a system of backlighting in each prison cell, the panopticon made it possible for a guard in the tower to monitor every movement that the prisoners made. They were constantly visible. The guard in the tower, on the other hand, was hidden. There were no lights in the tower to let prisoners know whether or not they were being watched; however, they knew it was always a possibility. So they had to constantly be on their best behavior to avoid punishment. Over time, the prisoners began to internalize the gaze of the guard and to monitor their own behaviors.

Presidio Modelo 2, by Friman on Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA)

The panopticon serves as a poignant metaphor for current surveillance practices. Just like the prisoners in the cells, everyone in society is subjected to different forms of surveillance that force their exposure—making their behaviors, identities, and relationships visible. Meanwhile, the organizations that collect this information about us (the metaphorical guards in the tower) are largely invisible. We don't often see who specifically is collecting information about us, what that information is, or how it's being

used. Even more significant is the psychological effect this surveillance has. Like the prisoners in their cells, most people don't know *if* they are being watched. They just know that it's *always* possible, so they also internalize the gaze of authority to monitor their own behaviors.

A classic example might relate to traffic laws. Most of us monitor our own speed. We come to a full stop at a stop sign. We sit at an intersection waiting for the light to turn green even if there are no other cars at the intersection. It's always *possible* that a cop might be stationed nearby or that we are being filmed by a traffic camera somewhere, and because we don't want to get a speeding ticket or have our license revoked, we drive a little slower. We make the full stop. We wait for the light to turn at the empty intersection. Often we don't even consciously make these choices because the behaviors—and often the underlying message about safety and good driving—have become ingrained in our minds. The same is true for lots of activities we do all day long, even parts of our identities that we might typically think of as inherent. Foucault would argue that a complex system of surveillance, rewards, punishments, self-monitoring, and internalization is responsible for nearly all of our behaviors.

While surveillance itself isn't new, the term "surveillance capitalism" typically refers to more recent practices related to digital technology and data collection, which emerged gradually once the internet shifted to a commercial enterprise run by a few private companies. You might recall from the first chapter that the World Wide Web was created with a focus on information sharing. The NSFNET, developed by the National Science Foundation, was dedicated to educational advancement and had initially banned the commercial use of the internet. That changed in the mid-1990s as the number of users grew beyond what the NSF could manage. Private companies provided internet services, and more and more businesses registered their websites with the purpose of attracting new customers.

One of the key events that perpetuated the development of

surveillance capitalism was the invention of cookies, which would record the unique navigation paths of individual users as they visited particular websites. According to Meg Leta Jones in "Surveillance Capitalism Online," these paths were called "clickstreams," which allowed web creators to understand how users were navigating their site and to use that information to evaluate the website's effectiveness. This technology was not built into the original design of the World Wide Web. In fact, Tim Berners-Lee intended for the web to be "stateless," meaning that it would retrieve the information that a user is looking for, but nothing about the transaction would be recorded or documented. For companies looking to understand the user journey, they called this original design the "memory" problem (Jones 186). The cookie, invented by computer scientist Lou Montulli, created a unique session ID that began when a user accessed a specific website. The server for that website would place the text code into the memory of the user's browser, which is then stored on the hard drive and allows the website to recognize that user each time they return to the website.

Importantly, Jones points out that the cookie is an "opaque" memory, meaning that it's invisible to the user (187). The code could include anything, to collect any sort of data, and the user wouldn't know, which connects directly to the idea of surveillance. The user becomes more visible while the companies collecting the data are largely hidden. This obviously raised concerns about user privacy, which then prompted Montulli to adjust the process so that users could manage their own cookie preferences and receive notifications before a cookie was placed on their computer. They could accept or reject the cookie, though the default was set so that all cookies were accepted. He argued that this was a technique that actually protected users because it kept their identities anonymous and it allowed them a measure of control over whether information was collected, though they still wouldn't know what type of information was collected or how it was being used.

And then as the Clinton administration ushered in self-regulation policies that removed commercial restrictions online

(White House) and as only a handful of large tech companies survived the [dot-com crash](#) in the early 2000s, new practices emerged that worked against the privacy of users (Salvucci). Whereas companies had originally tracked user data only when they were on a particular page, now they began tracking the users themselves as they traveled across the internet, and they began selling user data to interested third parties who could now market their products and services directly to users based on their past behaviors.

Interestingly, Jones points out that surveillance capitalism didn't begin with the cookie. As far back as the 1970s, direct mail companies would buy mailing lists from varying companies with the explicit purpose of targeting them with mail advertisements. For instance, one medical lab sold patient information to a direct mail service, which could then target those patients with ads for specific products. One woman received diaper coupons because her medical information revealed that she was pregnant. Jones explains, "Data breaches, sexual privacy, informational asymmetries, and racial bias were issues with direct marketing expressed by members of Congress in 1970" (197). However, when given the chance to take their names off all mailing lists, very few people responded. Though direct mail was considered a minor nuisance, the opt-out method was deemed sufficient to protect consumer information, which Jones argues is what set the precedent for increased surveillance capitalism once cookies were established.

Another important component in the history of surveillance capitalism was the emergence of Google, which improved search results by creating a system that collected information about users, their search queries, and their online behaviors. As Shoshana Zuboff points out in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, the system was initially about enhancing the user experience and providing the most relevant queries. However, it didn't take long for Google to realize the value of the massive amounts of user data it was collecting, which could be used for targeted advertising that profits off people's personal data. Zuboff

also points to Facebook as a pioneer in surveillance capitalism through its collection of user data and targeted advertising. Zuboff argues that increasingly, users are treated as commodities as every click is recorded as some sort of metric for enhanced analytics and profit. Businesses obviously profit off this sort of data, but so too do political organizations that have a stake in influencing voter opinions and behaviors. The last chapter discussed the power of media spins and echo chambers to direct people's perceptions of reality. By collecting data about these users, political entities could target their ads to individuals who are more likely to respond favorably to their message—because they are predisposed to certain beliefs and values. For example, the [Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2016](#) revealed that the data firm had acquired data from 50 million Facebook users and then sold that data to political campaigns so they could build voter profiles and create targeted ads that would sway voter sentiment (Confessore). This data was used to assist the Ted Cruz and Donald Trump campaigns in 2016 and to promote public support for Brexit.

Surveillance Practices

Remember that word "ubiquitous" from the first chapter? If our use of technology is ubiquitous, so too is surveillance. Hardly a moment of the day goes by when we don't have our phones nearby, tracking our location. And as mentioned in the previous section, many companies are tracking our activities across the internet, gathering data about sites we've visited, hyperlinks we've followed, products we've purchased, and so on. But the ways in which we are surveilled and the (known) uses of this information extend much further. Though it's impossible to identify every surveillance tactic and though government organizations and large tech companies aren't always forthcoming about the types of information they are collecting, this section will look at some of the more common

surveillance strategies made possible through a variety of technologies.

Video surveillance. Video cameras are increasingly common, particularly in public spaces such as busy intersections, parking lots, street corners, schools, shopping centers, and restaurants. Often, there will be a sign alerting the public that they are being recorded, but not always. Sometimes the cameras themselves are easy to spot, but not always. As you might imagine, cameras are used in many circumstances to help prevent crime and other unwanted behaviors. They're also helpful once a crime or some other incident has occurred because they provide footage of what happened and who was involved. Facial recognition software and license plate scanners make it even easier to identify individuals in specific places and visibly track their movements.

The concern many people have relates to the abuse of video surveillance—tracking and recording someone's movements for the sake of spying or using video surveillance in deceptive or inappropriate ways. For instance, people of color are typically monitored more closely, and video surveillance makes it easy to target/scrutinize these individuals while they are buying groceries, pumping gas, eating dinner, and so on (Lee and Chin). There have also been incidents where video cameras have been discovered in inappropriate places, demonstrating a gross abuse of power. In 2003, a middle school in Tennessee was sued by parents after they found out there were video cameras in the locker rooms that had recorded their children undressing, and because of a lack of security, the footage had been accessed by unauthorized users outside of the school system (ABC News).

Laptops and cell phones also have built-in video cameras, which is a cause for concern. During the COVID-19 pandemic as schools shifted to online learning, many people were concerned about platforms like Zoom that gave viewers access to students' homes, including their bedrooms and other activities that occurred in the background (Lieberman). Similarly, it became common practice to use remote proctors and other surveillance technologies

to monitor students' behaviors while they were taking tests. In many instances, students felt the monitoring was unfair and overly aggressive. And then there are the typical [concerns about hackers](#) who gain access to video feeds from laptops, phones, and personal home surveillance systems, usually with the intention of gaining bank account information or spying on users' personal activities (Erickson).

Voice recognition. Many technologies also have a microphone, including your phone, your computer, and many of your household devices like Siri or Alexa. There's been concern for some time that the [government spies on personal conversations](#) in order to collect personal information (Weinstein). However, tech companies are also leveraging voice recognition technology in order to identify who we are and build a profile about us. Google says that it [uses snippets of voice recordings](#) in order to get aggregate data about user preferences and how the device can be improved, but it says it doesn't connect specific conversations with specific users (Tucker). Of particular concern is the fact that these smart devices are [listening all the time](#) that they are on, even when they haven't been activated (King). What's more, the recordings are sometimes sent to third-party reviewers, which puts personal data at an increased risk.

Emails and texts. If you have an email account or a cell phone provided by your employer, they have the right to view that information. In fact, many employers have [monitoring software](#) installed on employee computers that allows them to view emails and other online activities (West). Cell phone companies retain records pertaining to text messages and when they were sent. Though most say that they [retain the messages themselves](#) for only a short time after they have been delivered, some do store the data for several days or even months after delivery (Evans). Likewise, up until 2017, Google would scan Gmail customers' emails for the purpose of having them analyzed for direct marketing purposes. Though Google no longer scans emails, it is still able to track users across multiple Google apps, including Gmail, Google Chrome,

Google Analytics, and Double Click. In fact, Google recently published its privacy label for the Gmail app, which reports on all of the types of data Google will collect, including location, purchase history, contacts, user content, search history, identifiers, and "other data" (Google, "Gmail").

Social media. Social media companies like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube can also collect information about you. This includes the information you provide in your profile as well as your posts. It also includes your list of contacts and the things that you like and share. All of this is information that can be used to provide targeted ads across multiple web platforms—not just your feed on that particular site. Many social media sites also collect information about your location, phone and email contacts, text and email messages, payment information, online views, and more. These social media companies not only use the information to better their own platforms, but they also make a lot of money by selling user information to advertisers (Vigderman and Turnera).

Digital records. In the digital age, most of the private information about you is stored on a digital server somewhere—your health care history, the medications you take, your bank account information, your grades, your credit score, your legal record. For instance, think about the type of information that most colleges collect about individual students—high school transcripts, income information, bank information, individual test scores and homework activities, attendance records, disciplinary files, physical or mental health information, specific disabilities, and so on. Likewise, doctor's offices, government organizations, merchants, and others all collect private information about you.

Big data. On a larger scale, more businesses as well as educational and governmental organizations are able to collect big data—massive amounts of information from a lot of different users that help them see big-picture trends. It's less about the individual user and more about analytics. To put it into context, this article in the *Harvard Business Review* says that Walmart collects 2.5

petabytes of information every hour based solely on customer transactions (McAfee and Brynjolfsson). Since a petabyte is "20 million filing cabinets worth of text," that means Walmart can fill 50 million filing cabinets in the course of an hour, and that doesn't count the information collected through cookies and other surveillance tools.

IoT. Let's look at one last category—Internet of Things devices. These are smart devices that connect to the internet and can then be controlled by our phones. Home security systems, garage doors, heating and cooling systems, medical sensors, smart watches, digital assistants like Alexa, doorbell cameras, and so on are all IoT devices that collect data. Some of the information is logged right away when you initialize the product and create a user profile, but most of the information is created through your ongoing use of the product (McFadin). This includes information about the product and its status, the surrounding environment, and usage.

Activity 4.1

This section includes many of the most common forms of surveillance and data collection. Make a list of the surveillance technologies that you encounter each day—whether on your personal devices or in public spaces.

After you make your list, separate them into two lists—one for what you consider to be acceptable or even beneficial uses of surveillance and one for what you consider to be too intrusive or threatening in some way. Consider your rationale for what constitutes positive surveillance (if anything) and what types of activities cross the line.

Commercialization and Behavior Modification

By now it's probably pretty clear that surveillance capitalism is about power and profit. Thinking back to Foucault's theory of the panopticon and the psychological effects that surveillance has on an individual, surveillance is a mechanism of control because it creates "docile" bodies who have become conditioned to behave in desirable ways, typically submitting to authority and accepting certain behaviors (and identities) as "normal." Once people are conditioned in this way, it's easy to capitalize on their perceptions and values to create market demand for certain products and to influence buying behaviors. Organizations in every industry collect information about people's experiences and turn it into data that can be leveraged to make predictions about what they will do. The more relevant the advertising is to an individual, based on their demographics, interests, location, and so on, the more likely they are to buy the product. In an [interview](#) about her book on surveillance capitalism, Zuboff explains,

> The opportunities to align supply and demand around the needs of individuals were overtaken by a new economic logic that offered a fast track to monetization....This economic logic has now spread beyond the tech companies to new surveillance-based ecosystems in virtually every economic sector, from insurance to automobiles to health, education, finance, to every product described as "smart" and every service described as "personalized."

Zuboff demonstrates the pervasiveness of surveillance capitalism with the recent discovery that even breathing machines are collecting data about people with sleep apnea. Health insurance companies receive that data and then use it for their own benefit, usually to deny or reduce coverage.

It would be impossible to trace all of the ways that surveillance capitalism either makes or saves (as in the example

above) companies money, but a few statistics might help put the growth of surveillance capitalism and digital advertising in perspective:

- From 2001 to 2020, digital advertising has grown by more than 40% (Ebsworth et al.).
- In 2021, digital advertising rose nearly 30% from the previous year, making the largest annual growth in history (Oberlo). The total spent on digital advertising that year was more than $520 billion worldwide.
- Google, Amazon, and Facebook receive the bulk (two-thirds) of these advertising dollars.
- Amazon's income from advertising doubles every two years ($14.1 billion in 2019). In 2020, Google made $147 billion in advertising. In that same year, Facebook made $86 billion, totaling 98% of its income (Ebsworth et al.).

Certainly, surveillance capitalism has proven to be popular, which is why it has grown so quickly. However, the major concern stems from two interrelated issues:

- Invasion of privacy. As much of this chapter has demonstrated, surveillance capitalism is clandestine (Andrew et al.). While people create Facebook and Google accounts because they believe these services are created *for* their benefit, they are often unaware that their profile information and online activities are tracked so that commercial entities can commodity their experiences and inundate them with advertising. Lots of different applications and smart devices have access to data that many people couldn't imagine, and much of it is sensitive data that they wouldn't want to be collected—and they certainly wouldn't want it to be shared and exploited.
- Behavior modification. Researchers like Zuboff claim that surveillance capitalism not only predicts what we will do but it

can actually alter the choices that we make through consistent yet subtle messaging that rewards us for certain behaviors and thus conditions us toward preset outcomes. [Zuboff](#) puts it this way: "The shift is from monitoring to what the data scientists call "actuating." Surveillance capitalists now develop "economies of action," as they learn to tune, herd, and condition our behavior with subtle and subliminal cues, rewards, and punishments that shunt us toward their most profitable outcomes."

Behavior modification goes hand in hand with surveillance. As companies collect more data about us, they are able to create better algorithms and ultimately make better predictions. This is largely dependent, however, on people's increasing engagement with digital media. Nir Eyal's book *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* explains the way that companies intentionally create addictions to products through a system of "triggers" (prompting users to use the product) and "rewards" (based on the user's compliance with the trigger). As Ebsworth et al. explain, "Increasing engagement via the hook model provides both a constant source of behavioural data and a committed audience for advertisements." In other words, as engagement (and addiction) increase, free will and freedom of thought would diminish as people are "conditioned," "tuned," and "herded" to make specific buying choices. As Foucault would say, they have become "docile" bodies.

Importantly, the concern about behavior modification is about more than just how people spend their money. It's also about ideologies and political choices. Political parties and interest groups can use data collection to steer people toward certain websites and information and use a similar system of rewards and punishments to direct their attention as well as their ways of thinking. "Political partisans, including shadowy private interests and foreign governments, promise to swing voters and elections with microtargeted social media campaigns" (Lauer and Lipartito 1). Some notable examples include the [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#)

noted above and also more recent attempts to [influence Cuban voters in South Florida](#) with propaganda that positions Democrats as communists (Kapnick; [O'Sullivan and Sands](#)).

Employers also use surveillance technologies to control behaviors. Systems for clocking in and out, video cameras in public workspaces, and software that monitors employee activities on work computers and cell phones all have the effect of keeping employees in line so that they can keep their jobs and perhaps be rewarded with promotions or pay increases. This is exactly the kind of surveillance and control that ties directly to Foucault's panopticon. People modify their behaviors to avoid punishment (or gain a reward), and over time as they internalize the gaze of the "guard" (in this case, the employer, but it could also be a teacher, government official, religious leader, etc.), their ways of thinking and being begin to shift in ways that benefit the authorities in charge.

Importantly, while everyone in society is surveilled to some degree, it is always the populations with the least amount of power—those who are already marginalized—who are surveilled to the greatest extreme: welfare recipients, people of color, immigrants, working-class employees, criminals, and women. [Gellman and Adler-Bell](#) explain it like this:

> Privacy scholars speak of philosophical rights and hypothetical risks; privacy-minded middle class Americans fear allowing the government too much access to their electronic trails. But there is nothing abstract about the physical, often menacing, intrusions into less fortunate neighborhoods, where mere presence in a "high-crime" area is grounds for detention, search, and questioning by police. At age sixty-five, tens of millions of Americans claim their Medicare benefits with nothing more eventful than completion of some forms. (Medicare.gov even promises to "protect your privacy by getting rid of the information you give us when you close the browser.") An impoverished single mother on Medicaid faces mortifying questions,

face-to-face with benefit managers, about her lovers, hygiene, parental shortcomings, and personal habits.

Their point is that surveillance capitalism affects everyone but not to the same degree. Its prevalence in our society has had real consequences for minorities, putting them under higher levels of scrutiny, finding reasons to inflict "punishments," and perpetuating discriminatory practices and injustices.

You might wonder what all of this has to do with digital writing. In some ways, it's maybe more geared toward digital *literacy*, understanding how to use digital media and the consequences of your choices. This critical unit is about complicating the overly simplistic and utopian views of digital media as unequivocally progressive and beneficial. It's about lifting the veil to examine the more negative effects of digital media, which will hopefully lead to more informed and intentional engagement. Also, as we'll see in the third section of the book related to functional literacy, digital writers do participate in surveillance practices. SEO is based exclusively on behavioral data—how people search for information and what they do as they travel across the internet. Digital writers use that data to write copy that will capture users' attention. They also use analytics to assess the effects of their SEO practices, and they use lead generation to send email campaigns and targeted social media ads to people—some who may have opted in to receive updates and ads, but many who haven't. Critical literacy means thinking more deeply about these practices and their ethical and social—not just financial—consequences in order to make informed choices.

Protecting Your Privacy

While it's impossible to navigate online spaces and remain completely off the grid, there are some important ways that you can control/limit the types of information that businesses can collect

about you. You can—and should—take important steps to protect your privacy, your data, and your accounts from cybercriminals. This final section of the chapter lists some basic things that you can do.

- **Create strong passwords.** Probably the best thing you can do to protect your private information from hackers is to create passwords that they can't guess. That means that they should be long and have a variety of upper and lowercase letters in addition to numbers and symbols. You should also have different passwords for different accounts. That might be a lot of passwords to keep track of, but there are password managers available that generate strong passwords, help you keep track of the passwords for your different accounts, and monitor your accounts for data breaches. A couple of common data managers are [1Password](), [LogMeOnce](), and [Dashlane](). Of course, you'd want to make sure that if you use a password manager, your "master password" for that account is strong.
- **Use two-factor authentication.** Many accounts are moving toward requiring two-factor authentication, which only grants you access to your account when you provide two pieces of evidence that you own the account, including a password in addition to a temporary passcode, facial recognition, a fingerprint, or an answer to a security question. This is a great way to prevent unauthorized users from gaining access to your accounts. You can also enable two-factor authorization on some of your accounts, including your Apple ID, Google, Facebook, X, and banking websites. Check your account settings to see what types of security features are available.
- **Install a browser extension.** As this chapter discusses, companies and other organizations can collect more information about you than you might realize based on your browsing history. A browser extension like [uBlock Origin]() is designed to prevent this data collection as well as the targeted ads that are generated as a result. [Privacy Badger]() is another

web extension that prevents trackers and targeted ads.

- **Cover your camera.** It's easier than you might think to install software on your computer that will take over your camera and collect private footage. An easy way to avoid that happening is to put a sticker over your camera.
- **Opt out of targeted ads.** Platforms like Apple, Facebook, Google, and X allow you to disable interest ads in your account settings, which will help cut down on the amount of targeted ads that you receive. You can also use this Simple Opt Out website to prevent similar data collection and ad targeting from numerous other organizations. Since you are "opted in" by default, you'll have to manually opt out of any sort of data collection.
- **Consider a virtual private network (VPN).** If you often connect to public Wi-Fi, a VPN can create a more secure connection by encrypting your data and hiding your IP address so that your internet service provider and other third-party organizations can't track your activities or see your information.
- **Use antivirus software.** Once your device has been "infected" with a virus, it's incredibly difficult to recover. Antivirus software adds another layer of protection that will help prevent viruses and other malicious software. Windows Defender is built into Windows automatically. Similarly, Mac computers have browser extensions and other security built in. You could always add another layer of security, such as Norton Antivirus or Malwarebytes. It's also important that as updates are made available for your browser, apps, and home devices, you install the latest version, which often has improved security features designed specifically for the latest threats.
- **Enable remote tracking on your phone.** If you lose your phone, it's important to make sure that your data doesn't fall into the wrong hands. To enable remote tracking, you must first set up a pin number and/or biometric login (i.e., facial or fingerprint recognition). You can then activate your phone's remote tracking feature, which will allow you to identify where

your phone is and, if necessary, delete all of its data from a remote location.

- **Beware of phishing scams.** Increasingly, scammers are targeting people through their emails and text messages, often posing as someone that you might know and encouraging you to click a specific link or download a file. Never click on a link in an email or text message unless you are certain it's legitimate. You can hover over the link to see for sure what the URL is and if it matches the location where it says it will take you. Lots of misspellings and invalid email addresses or phone numbers are also red flags. You'd also avoid downloading unknown files unless you verify with the person who sent it about what it is. These are common ways that criminals spread malware that can lock you out of your device.
- **Encrypt the information on your laptop.** It's also possible to enable encryption on your laptop so that if it's ever lost or stolen, your data can't be accessed because it will come up as gibberish. For Mac users, this encryption tool is called [FileVault](#) and can be turned on in the system preferences menu. For PC users, [device encryption](#) is available under the settings menu, under "Updates & Security" (Morse).
- **Be discerning.** You want to keep your phone number and email address as private as possible. Don't give them out unless you have to, and if you do have to give an email address to sign up for coupons or some other perk, it's helpful to have a secondary "burner" email address devoted to spam. That way, if the account does get hacked, it doesn't include a lot of personal information about you, and it's not connected to your important accounts. You should also make sure your settings on social media and other accounts are set to "private" and that you don't share sensitive information or photos over social media, email, or text messaging that could be damaging if they fell into the wrong hands.

As you can see, these guidelines relate to privacy in a

variety of ways—from targeted ads and data collection prompted by businesses and tech companies to data breaches from hackers looking to steal your private information. Though you won't be able to block all forms of surveillance that have become so prominent in our society, taking a few easy steps and being smart about the information that you share will help you take control over your data and provide a measure of protection from the invisible forces that have a stake in tracking your digital activities.

This section provided lots of helpful, and fairly easy, ways that you can protect your information. This activity is simple: See how many of the security measures you can complete on your phone or laptop in the course of 15 or 20 minutes. Many of them require a simple security adjustment or a change to your account preferences.

For those that are more complex—researching VPNs and browser extensions, for instance—do some research about your options, including features, cost, and consumer ratings. Compile a list of your top options.

Discussion Questions

1. Look again at the introduction to this chapter and

the analogy of the manila folder as it relates to today's more complex data collection. How did the manila folder and other organization systems make surveillance possible? Why is it fitting that the manila folder is sometimes seen as a symbol of oppression?

2. The chapter states in several places that data collection has the power to control behaviors in various ways. What does this mean? In what ways does surveillance influence people's behaviors?

3. What is a panopticon, as described by Foucault? How does the metaphor of the panopticon relate to current surveillance practices in our culture?

4. Which types of institutions perform this type of "panopticon" surveillance? Name as many as you can think of.

5. What does the "capitalism" in "surveillance capitalism" refer to? How do companies make money off surveillance practices?

6. What are some key historical events that perpetuated surveillance capitalism as we experience it today?

7. This chapter mentions several ways that your data are collected. Which ones were you already familiar with? Which ones were a surprise?

8. How do data collection and targeted advertising relate to behavior modification? What are some basic activities that organizations want to "nudge" people to do? Can you think of any specific examples of this type of nudging?

9. Why is surveillance capitalism such a concern?

10. What are some basic ways that you can protect your own personal data?

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5. Privileged Spaces

As we continue our critical investigation of digital technologies and practices, it's important to consider the many ways that social inequalities are perpetuated in digital spaces. In fact, the word "critical" has a deeper meaning that goes beyond thinking carefully about a topic from different perspectives. It can also be applied more specifically to the examination of power structures within a particular culture and how systems are often used to reinforce the unequal distribution of benefits among different groups of people. In fact, many issues that you might debate with someone are really about power: Who should have the power to make and enforce decisions? Which perspectives, behaviors, and people should be prioritized? Which ones should be subordinated or ignored?

This type of critical analysis requires constant self-awareness and self-discipline to identify flawed thinking, uncover "blindspots" and "self-delusions," and apply different modes of thinking (e.g., scientific, social, economic, moral) in order to reach a conclusion that will inform personal growth and positive action. It also requires repetition, making you examine the same issue over and over again as you encounter it in different contexts. This is perhaps the most challenging—and important—aspect of critical thinking: adopting a growth mindset that remains open to authentic self-analysis and revision, even (and especially) when it's an issue in which you struggle to engage with opposing perspectives.

What does critical thinking have to do with social justice? Everything. Your actions are driven by your values and beliefs—your ways of thinking about the world. We all fall into habits of mind based on personal perspectives and social norms, which guide our daily interactions and routines; more often than not, we're not fully conscious of where our underlying beliefs came from, how they align (or not) with our core values, and what consequences they have on other people. We might overlook or ignore how our actions

perpetuate the status quo in big and subtle ways. In contrast, critical thinkers do the difficult work of asking questions, wrestling with contradictions and complications, and silencing the natural feelings of defensiveness and dismissal that emerge when existing assumptions are challenged. The [Foundation for Critical Thinking](#) describes critical thinkers like this:

> They work diligently to develop the intellectual virtues of intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual civility, intellectual empathy, intellectual sense of justice and confidence in reason. They realize that no matter how skilled they are as thinkers, they can always improve their reasoning abilities and they will at times fall prey to mistakes in reasoning, human irrationality, prejudices, biases, distortions, uncritically accepted social rules and taboos, self-interest, and vested interest. They strive to improve the world in whatever ways they can and contribute to a more rational, civilized society.

It's not about guilt. As we studied in chapter 3, everyone has their own terministic screen that shapes the way that they interpret information. Being a critical thinker means that you examine your perspectives and personal biases and that you try your best to understand other viewpoints and experiences that are vastly different from your own.

When it comes to digital technology, this means looking beyond the utopian perspective of technology as being always inherently beneficial for everyone. In fact, contrary to what many people believe, digital technology has not leveled the playing field for minority groups. While it is true that the web was originally intended to be a marketplace of ideas where lots of different voices could be heard, the reality is that the internet has reinforced social inequalities based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, age, and so on. Minority groups don't have equal access to digital technologies, which is particularly true if we consider the different types of access. In his book *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*: *Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam Banks identifies

five types of access: (1) material access, "equality to the material conditions that drive technology use or nonuse" (41); (2) functional access, having "the knowledge and skills necessary to use technological tools effectively" (41); (3) experiential access, "access that makes the tools a relevant part of [the users] lives" (42); (4) critical access, "understandings of the benefits and problems of any technology well enough to be able to critique, resist, and avoid them when necessary as well as using them when necessary" (42); and (5) transformative access, "genuine inclusion in technologies and the networks of power that help determine what they become, but never merely for the sake of inclusion" (45).

Indeed, minority groups struggle with multiple levels of "access," and as our culture becomes more reliant on digital technologies for [social](#) (Helsper and Deursen), [educational](#) (Human Rights Watch), [professional](#) (Townsend), and [financial](#) (Sridhar) activities, the [digital divide](#) continues to grow (Li). What's more, when they are online, minorities continue to experience different forms of [discrimination](#), such as exclusion, stereotyping, and hate speech intended to belittle and discourage (Nguyen et al.). As you probably know already, hate speech is often more aggressive when done online because people can reach a wider audience; navigate in an echo chamber of other like-minded users who are unlikely to challenge in-group bias; and hide behind keyboards, pseudonyms, and anonymous avatars.

This chapter takes a critical look at the social inequalities that exist within—and are often made worse because of—digital technologies and online spaces. First, we will define what "privilege" is and how it functions in different contexts. Then we'll look at some of the social consequences of inequality and how the status quo is perpetuated in digital spaces, even amid technologies that are intended to promote positive change. Finally, we'll look at some practical tools you can use to evaluate the digital spaces you visit/support as well as your own digital messaging so you can act as a positive force in the fight for social justice.

- Understand the different types of "access" that relate to digital technologies.
- Consider the numerous advantages that come with access as well as the ongoing disadvantages for people who don't have access.
- Have a clear understanding of what "privilege" means and the tangible effects that it can have for those with and without privilege.
- Understand what the digital divide is and the different factors that relate to a person's ability to access digital spaces.
- Learn about the different ways that some groups of people are marginalized in online spaces. Consider the ways that this divide relates to other forms of privilege.
- Learn critical literacy tools that will enable you to be more aware of and have a positive influence on discriminatory policies and exclusionary messages.

Defining Privilege

Unfortunately, the word "privilege" has become politicized in recent years (Boyers). Some people automatically shut down or become defensive when they hear the word, perhaps because it is sometimes used to invoke guilt or to obfuscate other significant

experiences and qualities that make people unique. The point of discussing it here in this chapter is *not* to reduce people's rich human experiences and complex characteristics to a single attribute (e.g., gender, skin color, economic status), and it's certainly not intended to create feelings of guilt or defensiveness. The purpose is to bring awareness to the fact that most people have varying types of privilege depending on their social location. They experience certain benefits that other groups don't have access to because of lingering discriminatory practices and consequences. It's helpful for you to consider how privilege (or lack thereof) in certain circumstances has had an effect on your life and the opportunities that you've experienced and to consider the consequences of privilege (or lack thereof) for other people who are different from you.

First, a quick definition is in order. According to a [library guide](#) at Rider University, privilege can be defined as "certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that an individual has by virtue of belonging to certain social identity groups." The guide goes on to describe privilege that centers around qualities like race, class, religious affiliation, gender, education level, ability, sexuality, and so on. Everyone has a social location comprised of varying identities. To have privilege means that because of one or more of these attributes, you experience rewards and opportunities that other people don't. In contrast, in some circumstances, you might experience discrimination or unequal access to rewards and opportunities based on one of these social markers.

Let's look at a simple example: the world is clearly set up for people of average height. They are "privileged" because they experience automatic benefits based simply on this one physical characteristic. They can easily reach the pedals in their car. They can see over the person in front of them at a movie theater or concert. They can reach items on a top shelf at the grocery store or in their own closet. Their feet touch the ground when they sit in a normal chair. They can ride any roller coaster of their choosing at

an amusement park. Socially, they fit more easily into conversations because they are at a similar eye level with other people. These are all things they take for granted because they are in a privileged position. The world is set up for them, and they don't have to deal with the disadvantages of being short, which makes it easy to overlook. A short person, on the other hand, deals with the hassles every day of being short, which sometimes means they don't get the opportunity to ride a particular roller coaster or sit comfortably in normal chairs. In other cases, it means they have to work harder than other people to reach the top shelf or operate a vehicle. They are probably well aware of the disadvantages they face every day.

A similar example happened just a few years ago at an academic conference in which a panel of speakers was positioned to sit in chairs across a platform in an auditorium. A series of tall steps led up to the platform, and one of the speakers who was walking with a cane had a very difficult time getting up the stairs to the platform. The venue was set up for—it was "privileging"—people who were able-bodied and could easily climb a couple of stairs. No doubt, the people who organized and set up the venue with the platform were also able-bodied. They in no way *intended* for this woman to feel excluded or inconvenienced in any way. They simply didn't think about the problems that she would encounter because they didn't encounter those problems themselves.

You can probably see where this is going. These are both poignant examples of privilege that give some groups of people—tall or able-bodied people—an advantage over others. Of course, short people can still drive a car just fine with a few accommodations, and once they are able to reach the ingredients they need off the top shelf in the grocery, maybe with the help of a clerk or a step stool, their short stature doesn't have anything to do with the quality of the meal they might make when they get home. Similarly, the woman at the conference delivered an excellent presentation based on her expertise and years of study. However, in both cases, the short person or the disabled person had to work harder to overcome obstacles in order to participate in the same activities as

other people. This is what privilege is, and it can be applied to lots of different circumstances: the poor family who can't afford childcare for their children, the female employee who is always asked to make food for social events, the Black shopper who gets followed by store security.

This connects to digital technologies in profound ways. All digital technologies are designed by people with their own biases and blind spots, which in turn influences the way those technologies are designed and the experience that different users have. In the first chapter, we touched briefly on the idea of biased algorithms that serve dominant groups and further marginalize certain populations (Eubanks; Metz). That's often because the technology is created by people in dominant groups, those who have multiple layers of privilege and aren't accustomed to examining the world through a different lens. Take, for instance, the experience of [Joy Buolamwini](), who started an organization called the Algorithmic Justice League after realizing that the software she was using to develop a new "facial analysis technology" was racist. It would only work if she put on a white mask; it wouldn't recognize her black face. She coined the term "coded gaze" to refer to "the priorities, preferences, and prejudices of those who have the power to shape technology—which is quite a narrow group of people" (Buolamwini). In other words, many technologies are designed in ways that further marginalize certain groups and reinforce the status quo.

To truly understand privilege and its consequences, it's important to consider a few additional concepts:

- **Having privilege doesn't mean that someone hasn't worked hard for the things they've received**. As Allan Johnson explains in his book *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, "The existence of privilege doesn't mean I *didn't* do a good job or that I don't deserve credit for it. What it does mean is that I'm *also* getting something that other people are denied, people who are like me in every respect except for the social categories they

belong to" (21–22).

- **Your social location doesn't really say anything about you as a person**. The color of a person's skin, their gender, their economic status, and their education are all qualities that people have, but they don't say anything deeper about a person's personality, their values and beliefs, their hopes and dreams for the future, and so on.

- **Privilege is also not the same as difference, though the two things are related**. Again, Johnson helps shed light on the fact that difference, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. People are not naturally afraid of or repelled by difference: "The trouble is produced by a world organized in ways that encourage people to *use* difference to include or exclude, reward or punish, credit or discredit, elevate or oppress, value or devalue, leave alone or harass" (16). He goes on to explain how even the categories of difference are socially constructed as a way of creating labels and that these labels are used to "reduce people to a single dimension of who they are" for the sake of creating an "other."

- **The benefits of privilege are [exponential](#) (McCrann)**. Privilege means having advantages and resources on a daily basis to further your education, to obtain and maintain a career, to access job promotions, to develop a social support system, to take care of your own mental and physical health, and to pursue your interests and life goals. These things have a cumulative effect that puts someone in a greater position to reap more benefits. Something as simple as having the money for a tutor in middle school and high school would help a student learn study skills as well as important concepts that would elevate their GPA and test scores, help them get into more prestigious universities (perhaps with a scholarship), be successful in the academic program of their choosing, and be more likely to get a high-paying job in their given field, which leads to more financial benefits related to credit scores, material possessions, health care, retirement benefits, and so

on. Yes, this is a simplified example. The ability to pay a tutor might not be the sole reason for all of this success, but it would be a condition of privilege that would correspond with other advantages, such as parents who are well-educated, a comfortable home that is conducive to personal learning and growth, networking and internship opportunities, or the money to pay for a prestigious college once accepted. It's a complex network of advantages that facilitates continuing success. And for people who *don't* have particular types of privilege, their educational, social, and financial losses are also exponential.

- **Privilege is easy to ignore or explain away if you have it**. As demonstrated in the examples above, someone who is benefiting from some sort of privilege isn't likely to realize it. They aren't actively or intentionally oppressing anyone; they are simply living their lives in systems that are created to put them at the center, which makes it difficult to recognize the disadvantages other people face. If you aren't convinced, this [Buzzfeed article](#) has a long list of privileges that most people in first-world countries take for granted without giving a second thought to the significant personal benefits they provide or the reality that so many people around the world don't share these same benefits (Sloss).

The challenge, of course, is to recognize your own privilege in different ways. The simple fact that you have the ability and the time to sit and read this text—perhaps for a college class—signifies that you have the privilege of furthering your education, of taking the time to nurture your own personal and professional interests, of working toward a degree that will greatly enhance your chances of obtaining a rewarding career and reaping the financial benefits. In these and probably other areas as well, you've had some advantages that other people haven't because of previous and continuing privileges. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't work hard or take advantage of opportunities as they arise. It also doesn't mean that

you should feel guilty for your success. What it does mean is that you should pay attention to the way society is organized to benefit certain people, recognize your own privileged circumstances, and do what you can to effect positive change so everyone has equal access to opportunities and personal benefits regardless of differences.

Privilege is easy to overlook, which is why this [Buzzfeed article](#) by Morgan Sloss is useful. It challenges you to think about privileges that you probably haven't considered before. Review the list in the article itself as well as the user comments at the bottom. What other types of privilege can you think of that are often overlooked? Come up with as many as you can from your own life.

Marginalized Identities in Online Spaces

As noted in the introduction of this chapter, "access" can mean different things—having access to digital technologies, having access to the digital literacy skills necessary to effectively navigate online spaces, and having social access (acceptance) in various online communities. Marginalized groups lack access in at least one, if not all, of these ways. While many people are privileged enough to have automatic access to digital technologies and the personal, educational, professional, and civic advantages that come with them, others are excluded as an ongoing consequence of their oppression. This is called the [digital divide](#), referring to the growing chasm between groups of people who have access and those who do not (IEEE.org).

Indeed, the digital divide is getting worse. For one thing, as new technologies emerge and integrate into our everyday lives, the list of technologies and applications that marginalized groups can't access grows. For another thing, access to these technologies is increasingly a way of life for those who have it. This has been particularly true following the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), in which everything—education, professional activities, health care access,

and so on—shifted to online spaces and created a large disadvantage for people without internet access (University of Washington Bothell). [Lan Fang et al.](#) discuss those disadvantages:

> Information and communication technologies (ICTs), products that enable information storage, retrieval, manipulation, transmission, or reception in digital form, can improve access to goods and services; generate and maintain a safe and secure independent living environment; facilitate self-management of age-related challenges; and enable social connectivity and participation….The inaccessibility of ICTs has resulted in significant inequities in respect to who can access, use, and benefit from these interventions.

There are interrelated factors that contribute to the digital divide. While it might be easy to simplify the issue into "haves" and "have-nots," the problem is more complex, centering around the different types of access. [Beaunoyer et al.](#) identify four "proximal factors" that determine a person's ability to successfully use digital technologies:

1. **Technical means**—access to quality digital tools, both hardware and software, as well as internet connection
2. **Autonomy of use**—the personal time and space required to freely use the technology
3. **Social support networks**—connection with experienced users who can help a person learn various skills
4. **Experience**—enough time to become familiar with and to reap the benefits from digital technology

Importantly, it's no coincidence that some people have access to digital technologies and the benefits they provide and some people don't. Digital inequalities mirror, and thus reinforce, existing social inequalities related to race and ethnicity, which are [inherently linked](#) to socioeconomic status and educational attainment (American Psychological Association). [Fang et al.](#) call

it a "pattern of privilege," in which a person's social location is a determinant of other intertwined factors. Race, education, and income are connected and tend to create further challenges related to health, manual labor, strict gender roles, and so on, which further decrease the chances of someone gaining access to digital technologies. Though "access" is determined by a complex matrix of factors, there are several that stand out as particularly salient predictors:

- **Age.** Though the gap is getting smaller as more older adults gain access to digital spaces, there is still a significant number of older adults who aren't online. Hall et al. found that many older adults do have access to the devices themselves, but they aren't comfortable using digital technologies. They don't have a clear understanding of how the technologies work, and they don't have confidence that they will be able to learn. This is particularly concerning because so much health information—access to health records and communication with providers—occurs online.

- **Socioeconomic status.** Perhaps the most obvious factor is the digital gap between people who have the financial means to buy the latest technologies and internet services and those who don't (Khan Academy). Some people simply don't make enough to afford broadband internet or the range of devices that would allow them to be fully integrated into digital spaces. However, this also means that they lack access to resources and opportunities that might improve their financial situation—online degree programs and other educational activities, professional networking, job opportunities that are posted online or that require stable internet access, financial services, and so on. In other words, the divide grows wider as people with lower incomes fall further behind, while people with money are able to leverage digital technologies to acquire more wealth.

- **Education level.** People with higher levels of education are

more likely to consistently and effectively use digital technologies. This article by the [Pew Research Organization](#) demonstrates that people with lower levels of education and less income are less likely to use the internet for personal and professional learning activities. Instead, "the internet is more on the periphery of their learning activities" (Horrigan). This is one instance where "access" might take a couple different forms—the money to obtain digital devices as well as the literacy skills to effectively navigate online spaces. Once again, lack of access further widens the divide, as people in this group are [less likely to effectively participate](#) in school activities that would enhance their education level (American University). As the American University article explains, students without access to quality digital devices are less likely to perform well in online learning activities and are less likely to persist to higher levels of education.

- **Race.** As discussed above, race is closely connected with socioeconomic status and education level. Nonwhite groups, particularly people who are Black or Hispanic, are more likely to experience poverty, which further deprives them of important resources, like educational opportunities and digital technologies, and as we've already seen, the negative consequences are further compounded by ongoing disadvantages and missed opportunities. What's more, when racial minorities do gain access to online spaces, they are more likely to experience discrimination that excludes them and discourages their participation. In other words, they are denied "access" to social communities. According to [Tynes](#), online racial discrimination is a significant problem that affects a growing number of adolescents and includes things like "racial epithets and unfair treatment" based on race and ethnicity. It might also include rude or derogatory images, videos, comments, symbols, or graphic representations. Tynes also includes "cloaked sites" in the list of discriminatory practices, created to "spread misinformation about the history

and culture of certain racial/ethnic groups."

- **Gender.** Though there don't seem to be any indicators that one gender has more access to digital devices or literacy skills than another, women are more likely to experience different [forms of abuse online](). This article by the Council of Europe names a few examples: "non-consensual image or video sharing, intimidation and threats via email or social media platforms, including rape and death threats, online sexual harassment, stalking, including with the use of tracking apps and devices, as well as impersonation, and economic harm via digital means." The article goes on to explain that women are more likely to be the victim of cyberbullying and sexual exploitation online. What's more, individuals in the LGBTQ+ community are also more likely to experience online discrimination, exclusion, and harassment.
- **Immigration status.** [Immigrants]() are less likely to have access to digital devices or literacy skills (Cherewka). Like other examples we've explored, immigration status is closely linked to other predictors, such as socioeconomic status and education level. Also, immigrants in more rural areas are less likely to have broadband services.

WHEEL OF POWER/PRIVILEGE

Adapted from ccrweb.ca

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These are just a few of the factors that influence a person's level of access to digital spaces along with the numerous tangible and intangible benefits that access affords. As indicated in the examples, the negative effects of having little or no digital access are cumulative, including fewer educational and employment opportunities, limited social support (Courtois and Verdegem), diminished health literacy and access to health care resources (Beaunoyer et al.), and more struggles with mental health and social well-being (Büchi et al.). Beaunoyer et al. explain:

> As an emerging form of social exclusion, digital exclusion contributes to worsen material and social deprivation. Being digitally excluded has consequences on health determinants such as education, work, and social networks, which impacts contribute in return to maintain limited access and use of technologies, a phenomenon referred to as the "digital vicious cycle."

This section touched briefly on some of the more obvious consequences of the digital divide, especially for those populations that don't have access to digital tools, literacy skills, and social communities. See if you can come up with other consequences—for individual populations as well as society as a whole. Some of the ongoing effects might be fairly obvious and significant, while others might be more subtle.

Critical Literacy in Action

Social inequality is a complex and pervasive problem, and there aren't any simple solutions. Nevertheless, there are things we can do to help close the digital divide, especially if we make a conscious effort to pay attention to the disadvantages that other people face and practice an attitude of inclusion. For one thing, we can support programs and government policies that are working toward digital equality and oppose decisions that would increase the gap. For instance, [net neutrality](#) is a common term relating to the equal access of users and businesses to high-speed internet capabilities (Finley). It's the principle that internet providers should not be able to discriminate against some types of content (by blocking or slowing down internet speeds) in favor of others (that load much faster), which in turn reduces the access of some people and/or businesses to have their message heard.

Ultimately, without net neutrality, providers can prioritize some information—and also some types of people—over others based on people's ability to pay more money. According to Finley, "The fear is that, over time, companies and organizations that either can't afford priority treatment, or simply aren't offered access to it, will fall by the wayside." Unfortunately, many of the net neutrality laws that had been in place during the Bush and Obama administrations were overturned in 2017, which has opened the door for providers to take advantage of fewer restrictions and more financial incentives.

You can also support government programs and projects that are geared toward closing the divide. For instance, part of Biden's American Jobs Plan is to "revitalize America's digital infrastructure," which would include 100% broadband coverage so that "unserved and underserved areas" gain access to internet services, greater competition among a greater number of large and small providers, and reduced internet prices (The White House). However, as Chakravorti of the Harvard Business Review points out, "Infrastructure alone does not necessarily translate into adoption and beneficial use. Local and national institutions, affordability and access, and the digital proficiency of users, all play significant roles—and there are wide variations across the United States along each of these." In addition to the infrastructure that makes it possible for underserved populations to access the internet, Chakravorti points out the need to increase "inclusivity" (so that broadband is affordable and increases the likelihood that people will be able to *adopt* internet technologies), "institutions" (to promote government policies and best practices that prioritize public access), and "digital proficiency" (to help people learn how to effectively navigate digital technologies to send and receive information).

According to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT), adoption is really key. Yes, it's important to expand the infrastructure to make broadband services available and affordable, and it's helpful to subsidize the cost of

emerging technologies so that everyone can use and benefit from them, but availability doesn't matter if people don't adopt the technology, either because they don't have the skills to effectively engage with it or because they don't believe that it's beneficial. As the NCDIT page explains, there are grants and other programs available to not only provide resources to underserved communities but also supply the training needed to help them successfully utilize those resources.

DEI Framework

While there are some political agendas and grant programs that might seem pretty far removed from your everyday sphere of influence, there are also more direct, individual practices you can adopt to create an online environment where everyone feels welcome. The whole point of understanding your own privilege in certain circumstances is to better identify moments where other people are marginalized in some way and to utilize your own influence to help rectify those issues. While the DEI framework is most often used by businesses trying to cultivate a more just and welcoming environment, it is also a great way to begin thinking about your digital practices so that you can have a positive effect on the communities you're a part of.

DEI stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion (Extension Committee on Organization & Policy). According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), "The diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) function deals with the qualities, experiences and work styles that make individuals unique (e.g., age, race, religion, disabilities, ethnicity) as well as how organizations can leverage those qualities in support of business objectives." In other words, being inclusive of different identities and perspectives is not only ethical but it promotes business success. In fact, a 2022 study found that companies with a diverse workforce earn 2.5 times more

revenue per employee, and inclusive teams are 35% more productive (Research and Markets). Let's look at each word in the acronym and consider how it might influence your online activities:

- **Diversity.** In this case, diversity refers to differences in race, gender, location, socioeconomic status, age, religion, (dis)ability—anything related to a person's social location that has a natural influence on the way that they experience and perceive the world. People and organizations that work to foster diversity are intentional about cultivating a diverse community because they see the inherent value in having different types of people and perspectives. It enriches the overall community, as people share their own ideas and experiences and are likewise challenged to consider viewpoints that are different from their own. What this means for your online activities is that you too would be intentional about openly and respectfully engaging with diverse people to better understand their experiences and ways of thinking. It doesn't mean you have to agree with other people all of the time, but it does mean that you should try to listen and to see where they are coming from. In addition to engaging with different people on various social media platforms, you'd also make an effort to diversify the places where you go to get your news and entertainment, all of which would make you more sensitive to the experiences and concerns of people who are different from you.
- **Equity.** This term refers to practices that value and prioritize social justice so that all people have equal opportunities. To be a proponent of equity means that you have a deeper understanding of the inequalities that persist in our society and the tangible effects that they have on people's lives. You not only recognize that these inequalities exist, but you advocate for marginalized groups in an effort to challenge discriminatory practices and mindsets and evenly distribute resources and opportunities. It means that as you engage with

different groups of people online, you'd be aware of overt discriminatory practices as well as microaggressions that make people feel excluded or uncomfortable. At the very least, you'd stop engaging with groups and/or individuals who exhibit these negative attitudes. You might even feel compelled to address discriminatory behaviors in order to (hopefully) develop other people's sense of awareness and sensitivity.

- **Inclusion.** Whereas equity is about addressing social injustice, inclusion is about making people who are typically marginalized feel welcome, like they are *wanted* and *valued.* In fact, the word "tolerance" has in some ways developed a negative connotation because it doesn't imply that someone is truly wanted. To feel like someone is simply tolerating you would probably not make you feel particularly welcome. You'd feel like you are a nuisance. You'd still feel marginalized. Inclusion is about going out of your way to make people feel comfortable and included in the group. You'd invite other people to share their perspectives and participate in the conversation. You'd affirm their sense of belonging and the benefit/insight that they bring to the group.

Utilizing this DEI framework won't help with the larger problem of the digital divide, but it does help with one kind of access. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there are different kinds of access, including not only access to the technology or the skills necessary to use that technology but also access to groups online where people feel that they are respected and that their voices are heard. If more people enacted a DEI mentality as they engaged with different groups of people in digital spaces, there would be fewer "privileged" spaces where some people feel ignored or unwelcome.

Practicing Third Persona

Admittedly, it can be difficult sometimes to step outside of your own perspective to really understand or predict how someone from a marginalized group might be feeling in response to a particular conversation or message. It's the type of thing that requires intentionality and practice. It also requires a degree of humility because the odds are that as you engage with different types of people, you might unintentionally say something that is offensive or insensitive, and in those moments, the best thing to do is to apologize and learn from the situation by trying to understand it from the other person's point of view.

Learning also comes from thinking critically about the messages that you encounter as well as the messages that you create in order to identify the effect that they might have on your audience. Here we're dipping into the rhetorical literacy that is covered more extensively in part two of the textbook, but it's worth a brief mention here, since thinking critically about your messaging also requires thinking critically about your audience and your underlying purpose. The main concept that is really helpful for identifying insensitive or exclusive messages is called "third persona," a concept that was introduced by Philip Wander in 1984. However, first it might be helpful to refresh your memory about "point of view." You've probably learned that a text can be written in first person (with the focus on the speaker—"I" or "me"), second person (with the focus on the audience—"you"), or in third person (with the focus on *other* people outside of the group—"he," "she," "they").

Wander's concept of third persona was a response to Edwin Black's 1970 essay, "The Second Persona." In his essay, Black discusses the concept of second persona as the audience that is *implied* within a message. It isn't so much about the actual, real-life people who are part of the audience; it's more about the ideal audience that is invoked in a message, which in turn invites the

real audience to adopt a certain identity. Walter Ong discusses a similar concept in his article "[The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction](#)," in which the writer imagines an ideal audience and crafts their message accordingly. For example, if a student is going to miss class for a doctor's appointment, they might send a professor an email that looks like this:

> Professor X, I'm so sorry to have to miss class, but I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow that I wasn't able to reschedule. I know that you take attendance very seriously, as do I, but I'm having some important tests run tomorrow. I'll be sure to get notes from a friend so I can catch up on what I miss. Thank you for understanding!

In this short email, the student invites the professor to adopt a certain identity as someone who "takes attendance very seriously" but would also be understanding of the importance of a doctor's appointment and the tests that are scheduled. The student is also portraying the professor and the class as a serious endeavor, implied by the fact that she is "sorry" to miss and that she knows important information will be presented, so she'll be sure to find out what she missed from a friend. The *actual* professor—the one behind the computer screen reading the email—may or may not have all of those qualities, but chances are that the professor would read the email and feel somewhat compelled to adopt the identity of a serious yet gracious instructor and respond positively to the student's message. In other words, second persona is about understanding the ideal target audience and how that audience is portrayed in a particular message. A well-crafted message will invoke an audience with particular interests, qualities, and values that are appealing and therefore increase the likelihood of a positive response.

Whereas second persona is about the ideal target audience ("you"), Wander's concept of third persona is about the segment of the audience that is left out—the "other." He describes it as the part of the audience that is "negated" or "alienated" by a text. He says, "But just as the discourse may be understood to affirm certain

characteristics, it may also be understood to imply other characteristics, roles, actions, or ways of seeing things to be avoided. What is negated through the Second Persona forms the silhouette of a Third Persona" (Wander 209). In other words, just as a message will automatically invoke ideal, good qualities that the audience should possess, it also inherently implies negative qualities that should be avoided. He makes it clear that many texts don't do this intentionally; they simply take for granted what is "good" or "normal," probably based on the speaker's own social location and perspectives. Those identities are put in the center of the message, while audiences who don't fit that criteria are pushed to the fringes. Their lived experiences and perspectives are portrayed in a negative way or ignored altogether. And often the identities that are negated in a text are those same marginalized groups that have historically been "left out" of all types of conversations, resulting in continuing inequalities: "Beyond its verbal formulation, the Third Persona draws in historical reality, so stark in the twentieth century, of peoples categorized according to race, religion, age, gender, sexual preference, and nationality, and acted upon in ways consistent with their status as non-subjects" (Wander 216).

Another example might be helpful to really see how the concept of third persona might be applied to a message. Here is an example of a simple assignment prompt for a college-level writing course:

> For this assignment, you will write a rhetorical analysis of an online space—ideally someplace where you are fairly active. To begin, you should explore why you are drawn to this site. Does it in some way confirm your own Christian values? American values? You should also consider what you think is the purpose of the site and how the different elements of the site work together to help fulfill that purpose. When you get home this evening, post a brief response on our Canvas forum (around 500 words) discussing your perspective of the website you have chosen.

At first glance, this assignment prompt might seem innocent enough. It's asking students to do a very common writing assignment—a rhetorical analysis—and to consider their own perspectives of a particular online space. However, a closer look through the lenses of second and third persona reveals a pretty significant problem when it comes to the way that the ideal audience—those conscientious students in the course—are portrayed. It assumes (second persona) several things about the audience:

- That they are "active" online.
- That they might naturally have "Christian" or "American" values as part of their identity.
- That they automatically have the extra time and the resources when they get home that evening to write a response.
- That they are confident writers and 500 words is a "brief response" that should be fairly easy.

This is the ideal, "normal" audience that is implied in the assignment prompt. Certainly, in many college classes, there are students who would fit this persona and they would likely feel compelled to step into the identity of a confident and thoughtful writer. However, many students don't. The assignment prompt wasn't written with the intent to make anyone feel discouraged, frustrated, or alienated, but that would absolutely be the result for some groups of students. The assignment prompt ignores the fact that some students might not be "active" online for whatever reason. It ignores the fact that students might have different nationalities or religious beliefs. It ignores the fact that many students work in the evenings or have other personal obligations that would prevent them from being able to complete this type of assignment so quickly. It ignores the reality that some students don't have access to digital technologies or Wi-Fi at home and that for them, completing this assignment would be much more difficult. It also ignores students who struggle to write,

who would need a lot more time and direction to put together a 500-word response.

Because of the power dynamics and the nature of some of these assumptions about what it means to be a "normal" college student, chances are that students who did feel alienated by this message wouldn't necessarily challenge the professor or even call to attention the difference in their own identities and experiences. Some would probably still do the assignment, but they would have to work a lot harder to find a public-access computer and to spend the couple of hours it might take to complete the assignment. Some might go ahead and write an analysis that centers their own values regarding religion, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and so on, or they might feel pressured to conform to "American" or "Christian" or some other dominant identity because they think they will get a better grade or because they don't want to draw attention to themselves as different. And then there will be some students who are alienated by this assignment prompt and won't do it because they don't have the technological resources or the assumed writing abilities to complete it in one evening. They'll get a zero for the assignment, and if the course is sprinkled with lots of similar assignments that put them at a disadvantage, they'll eventually disengage and either withdraw or fail the course.

This might seem like an extreme example, but the reality is that messages have a great deal of influence over an audience and their responses. For audiences who feel included in and valued by the message, who feel capable of stepping into the ideal persona that is portrayed, they are likely to respond positively to the message and receive the ongoing rewards of acceptance and prosperity, be they social, financial, educational, and so on. The reverse is true for people who aren't included in the message, who don't feel valued or capable of stepping into the ideal persona, who feel ignored altogether.

As we have studied throughout this chapter, there are tangible disadvantages that come with being excluded from digital spaces. Taking a critical approach to your own digital writing and

the messages that you encounter online is an important step toward true equality where everyone has access. Obviously, the point of adopting a DEI framework and analyzing a message—particularly your own—through the lens of third persona is to make necessary revisions to your habits of mind and digital practices that might unintentionally perpetuate others' marginalized status. In an ideal world, there wouldn't be "privileged" spaces; there would instead be a rich, diverse community of ideas and perspectives that benefit everyone involved and continually invite more people to the conversation(s). Critical literacy is at the very heart of making that vision a reality.

Activity 5.4

Reread the section of this chapter about DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). For each concept of this acronym, write a reflection about your own digital practices. What are you already doing in this area? What problems or challenges do you encounter? In which spaces do you feel "included"? In which spaces do you feel "excluded" in some way? What types of things can you do in each category to have a more positive effect?

Activity 5.5

Select a handful of texts in which you are in the audience. This might be a diverse selection of text messages / emails directly to you or a group that you're a part of, and it might also include messaging on social media or websites in which the audience is broader. Analyze these messages using second and third persona. Remember that second persona is about the ideal target audience, and third persona is about members of the target audience who are ignored or devalued. What types of qualities (and identities) are implied as positive or normal in the message you selected? What types of identities are overlooked or even devalued?

Now do the same thing for a handful of texts that you have recently written. Once again, try to select a variety of texts and emails as well as other messages, such as blog posts, social media posts, forum responses, and so on. What do you notice about the assumptions that you make about your audience? What kinds of qualities do you assume that your audience has? What types of people might feel marginalized when they read your message? Are there ways that the text could have been written differently to be more inclusive?

Discussion Questions

1. What are the different definitions of the word

"critical"? How can they be applied to your own digital writing?

2. What are the different types of "access" that are referred to in the chapter? Can you give a deeper explanation or example for each one?

3. What is privilege? What forms of privilege do you have that put you at an advantage over others? What forms of privilege don't you have?

4. The chapter also makes some additional distinctions about the concept of privilege. What are they? Which ones strike you as particularly relevant or important for you and the experiences you've had?

5. What is the "coded gaze"? The chapter identified one example of a biased algorithm. Can you think of other examples? What are the ethical consequences of these technologies?

6. What is the digital divide? In what ways is the digital divide getting worse? What are the four different factors that influence a person's ability to participate in the digital realm? Can you think of other factors that might be important or relevant?

7. How is the digital divide connected with other forms of privilege? In other words, people who are denied "access" in some way also experience discrimination and inequalities based on other factors (e.g., race, age, ability, gender). Explain this connection.

8. What are some of the more prominent factors that influence a person's level of digital access?

9. How are the advantages and disadvantages of digital access "exponential"? What does this mean? Can you come up with some examples?

10.   What is the DEI framework? What do the different terms in the acronym stand for? How can this be applied to help remedy inequalities of access? Why do you think that businesses that utilize DEI are more successful?

11.   Explain the concepts of second and third persona. How can these concepts be used as a lens to critically analyze a text to understand how "access" is being denied to certain identities?

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6. Affordances and Constraints: A Critical Analysis of Digital Spaces

This final chapter in the Critical Literacy Unit ties together some important information as we delve a bit deeper into a critical perspective of technology and how some of the theories we've discussed so far might be applied to your daily life. The previous chapters have explored various aspects of digital technology with the goal of complicating and extending your understanding of the social, professional, educational, and civic benefits. Hopefully, by now it's clear why the concept of a "digital panacea" is a myth and that for you to be truly intentional and effective as you navigate various digital spaces, having a deep understanding of the benefits as well as the limitations of those spaces is crucial.

Far from more dystopian views of technology, this textbook celebrates the opportunities and incredible rewards that so often come along with online engagement—the opportunity to quickly and easily find information about a variety of topics, the ability to communicate with family and friends and colleagues to maintain social connectedness and increase productivity, the ability to engage in civic groups and participate in meaningful dialogue to address important issues. It's no wonder that so much of our lives revolve around digital technologies; they've become integral to our communication patterns, our daily workflows, our personal interests, our civic activities, and our entertainment preferences. Indeed, part of critical literacy is being aware of various ways that you rely on digital technology. As we'll see in this chapter, these technologies don't just affect what you can *do*, they have a profound impact on your thought patterns and your sense of identity—what you can *think* and who you can *be*. And while that might sound a

little chilling, particularly after our discussions about surveillance and behavior modification, it's not necessarily a bad thing, and it's certainly not new. Human beings have always been "shaped" by the tools that they use. Digital technology is a profound example in a long line of other examples, and it has significantly expanded the types of identities we can inhabit.

As we've considered in different ways throughout this first unit, digital technology isn't automatically, inherently beneficial. There are opportunities for rewards just as there are also risks associated with digital participation. Without intentionality and careful self-monitoring, your use of digital technology can have a negative effect on your social relationships, your cognitive function, and your emotional health. (See chapter 2 for a recap of "The Bad and The Ugly.") Without a conscious awareness of your everyday digital practices and the more subtle—often invisible—encounters that you might have with digital surveillance, commercialization, echo chambers, and underlying agendas and spins, you will most certainly be susceptible to the manipulations of other people whose values and interests may or may not align with your own. You'll be unaware of how businesses and large, impersonal corporations motivated by profit margins influence how you spend your time and money, what you think about, and even what you believe to be true about the world. There's also the reality that you have certain "privileges"—as evidenced by your basic ability to access this digital text (i.e., your access to a digital device and your ability to read the text)—and without a critical awareness of what those privileges are and the difficult obstacles that other people face, you'd never notice. You wouldn't be a positive force to combat some of the most fundamental social injustices because you haven't challenged yourself to pay attention to what they are.

This textbook is focused on helping you develop your own digital literacy so that you have the underlying skills and critical thinking required to leverage the numerous benefits of participating in digital spaces while also knowing how to identify and mitigate the risks and limitations. While the previous chapters in this unit

focused on specific theories and concepts related to critical literacy, this final chapter takes a step back to look more generally at the affordances and constraints of digital tools. It will provide a framework that will help you think more deeply about the technologies, platforms, and practices that define your own participation and to tease out some of the inherent complexities of the choices you make from an ideological, personal, professional, and practical perspective.

how the framework of affordances and constraints might be applied.

Affordances and Constraints of Digital Tools

Most of the time, when we think of digital technologies, we focus on the things they allow us to do. For instance, we can talk "face-to-face" with someone miles away using FaceTime or Zoom. We can curate our own music playlists and listen to the songs we like all day long with portable earbuds. We can quickly and easily see what our friends, family, and acquaintances are up to with a quick scroll through our social media feed. And on and on. Many of the technologies that we use have become so commonplace that we don't really give much thought to what life would be like without them. However, when we're forced to go without them—maybe because we forgot our phone at home or the Wi-Fi has gone out—then suddenly we realize just how much we rely on digital technology to accomplish even the most basic tasks.

While digital technology—like all technology—certainly does allow us to do things more quickly and easily than we might have otherwise, its effects on our lives are much more profound. As we'll discuss in this section, it has an inherent influence on our thought patterns and our own sense of "self" as we act out identities utilizing these tools. We'll be relying heavily on the scholarship of Rodney Jones and Christoph Hafner, whose book *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction* describes the way that technology mediates all of our activities. Remember from chapter 3 that to "mediate" means to go between two things or to "facilitate

interaction" (Jones and Hafner 2). They aren't referring only to digital technology but any sort of technology that is human-made for the purpose of helping us accomplish certain tasks. Pencils, blankets, clothing, furniture, and toothbrushes are all examples of technologies created for very practical purposes. And as Jones and Hafner point out, they also "mediate" our activities as we interact with the world. For instance, we would be hard-pressed to keep our teeth clean and healthy without using certain technologies—a toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss. The same goes for the quick reminder we might write ourselves on a Post-it note or the coffee that we drink to get ourselves going in the morning. Without the pencil and paper or the coffeemaker and mug, you wouldn't be able to complete these very basic tasks, which probably seem fairly incidental in the overall scope of your day—until you have to go without them.

One of the best examples of technology and how it mediates our activities relates to our communication practices. In itself, language is a technology. It's a human-made tool that helps us accomplish specific purposes, and it serves as a mediator between our thoughts and feelings and the people with whom we want to communicate those thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, the Vulcan mind meld—where you simply touch your fingertips to someone else's head in order to accomplish total mutual understanding—isn't a real thing. You have to use language—be it verbal, written, sign language, or body language—to help someone else understand your meaning. Language is a *medium* that facilitates your interactions with others. As we learned chapter 3, language is often limited in helping us fully express ourselves and understand others. Misinterpretations and misunderstandings are common, though there is something to be said for the way that communication allows people to connect in very profound ways (Balter).

The main idea is that the technologies that we use *do* help us accomplish a variety of activities, but beyond that, they also become "extensions of ourselves" (Jones and Hafner 2). The more

that we rely on everyday technologies to quickly and easily perform tasks, the more [invisible](#) those technologies become (Steinhardt). We might be extremely aware of how newer technologies like Zoom or virtual reality equipment open up new types of experiences and possibilities, but we don't think so much about how our coffee mug holds hot and cold liquids and provides the ability for us to carry those liquids around. It's an invisible technology that we take for granted, adopting it as part of our identity. Jones and Hafner put it like this: "In order to do anything or mean anything or have any kind of relationship with anyone else, you need to use tools. In a sense, the definition of a person is a human being *plus* the tools that are available for that human being to interact with the world" (2).

Drawing from [Marshall McLuhan](#) and [Lev Vygotsky](#) (Kurt), Jones and Hafner offer a framework that allows a deeper understanding of the way that technology influences our fundamental definitions of self. In his introduction to *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan writes, "Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot affects the whole psychic and social complex." They don't just affect what we can do but who we can be and how we relate to other people. Though basic technologies become invisible and are easily taken for granted, they have significant influence over every aspect of our human experience. When examining these influences, Jones and Hafner created a framework for understanding both the affordances—the possibilities that are enabled through our uses of technologies—as well as the constraints—the possibilities that are foreclosed by those same technologies. We can look at both the affordances and constraints of any given technology in five different ways:

- **Doing.** At a fundamental level, technology helps us do certain things that we couldn't do otherwise (the affordances). As we adopt their use for specific activities, they also *prevent* us from doing other things (the constraints). Jones and Hafner give the example of a microphone—a technology that allows you to easily talk to a large group of people so they can hear you (an

affordance), though it makes it impossible to have a private conversation with one or two people in a crowd (a constraint). Similarly, an email allows us to communicate important information in writing to an individual or a group (an affordance), but it's also impersonal and it slows down the back-and-forth exchange that an in-person conversation would provide (constraints).

- **Meaning.** The technologies we use also influence the types of meanings that we can make. Applications like Zoom and Facebook Live, for instance, communicate audio and visual elements and have the effect of making the audience feel like they are simultaneously experiencing an event with someone else. These messages and events take on a different meaning for the participants than they would have otherwise through text alone (affordances). However, those meanings are still limited by the vantage point of the camera or the inability of the microphone to pick up more subtle sounds (constraints). Jones and Hafner also point out that as technologies emerge, we have different ways of referring to our activities—live streaming, zooming, posting, sharing, following, texting, chatting, and so on—which are different kinds of meanings than we had before.

- **Relating.** Our use of technology influences the types of relationships that we can have based on the ways that we communicate. Some technologies allow for one-way communication from a speaker to an audience. Others allow for private one-on-one conversations as a limited group communicates back and forth. Still other technologies allow large groups of people to communicate back and forth. For instance, a text message is great for having a more private conversation with a closed group of people (affordance). However, it's not very effective for speaking with a large group (constraint), and the nature of the platform makes it more difficult to share lengthy, in-depth messages (another constraint). Though you also relate to people outside of digital

technology in different ways, chances are that many of your interactions do take place in digital spaces, and the technologies that are available to you have a significant influence over who you are able to communicate with and the method of communication.

- **Thinking**. According to Jones and Hafner, our use of technology has "the capacity to change the way we experience and think about reality" (7). They go on to say that as we use technologies to accomplish certain tasks and interact with our surroundings, "certain things about the world will be amplified or magnified, and other things will be diminished or hidden from us altogether" (7–8). They are referring not just to what we think about but also our thought patterns. Because we have access to so much information at our fingertips, we don't spend so much time memorizing facts (which can be seen as both an affordance and a constraint). Instead, we can spend more time with more sophisticated forms of thinking, like creating new theories about the information that we have access to. We can spend more time collecting, analyzing, interpreting, synthesizing, and reasoning (affordances). On the other hand, our constant interaction with short, entertaining videos and brief online text with bullet points and hyperlinks might also affect our ability to engage for longer periods of time with other forms of information that we find "boring" or difficult (constraints).

- **Being.** On a fundamental level, the technologies we use have a direct influence on our sense of self—the identities that we inhabit. Doctors and nurses use medical stethoscopes and other medical equipment. Carpenters use hammers and measuring tape and other carpentry tools. As a student, you use textbooks and word processing applications and learning management systems, which are crucial to the ways that you act out your identity as a student. The technologies that you have access to influence the type of person you can be and how you express those identities—allowing for some options

through the affordances and foreclosing other options through the constraints.

It might be worth noting that Jones and Hafner don't consider constraints to be inherently bad. In fact, without the presence of a constraint, people often adopt technologies without thinking about better alternatives. And the presence of a constraint can spark people to think about more creative and innovative solutions. These concepts are simply tools that can help you think more deeply about the technologies you use, even (especially?) those that are so commonplace, you almost forget they are there. For the remainder of this chapter, we'll use this framework to examine technologies from different perspectives in order to further extend your critical literacy and decision-making skills.

Activity 6.1

Make a list of the different technologies (beyond digital) that you use on a daily basis that have in some ways become "invisible" extensions of yourself.

Alternatively, you might take a look in your backpack or purse or even your pockets. What technologies do you carry with you each day?

For each technology that you identify, consider what those technologies allow you to do. How do they mediate your activity? How might they be considered extensions of yourself?

Now take a closer look at one or two of the technologies you identified. What are the affordances and constraints in

terms of what these technologies allow you to do, mean, relate, think, and be?

An Ideological Perspective

A critical perspective of the affordances and constraints of digital technologies would certainly include an examination of the ideologies that are embedded in our assumptions of and uses for the online spaces we navigate. Everything that you do or think or believe about the world is compelled by underlying ideologies—what you have internalized as "normal" or "good" or "valuable." Through the natural course of interacting with others—your parents, teachers, friends, pastors, and so on—you've developed your own ways of thinking about and acting in the world. For our purposes, there are three things that are helpful to understand about ideology:

1. **It's based in social interaction**. Value systems aren't objective, nor are they independent of human creation. An ideology is a lens that is shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces, advocating one way of seeing and being over others.
2. **It's often not explicit**. Ideologies are implicitly embedded in the things we say and do, but they exist below the surface, often resisting a deeper interrogation. Critical literacy explicitly examines these underlying assumptions.
3. **It's difficult to notice**. Because we are so entrenched in our beliefs about the world, it's easy to take them for granted as the objective reality—the "right" way of seeing and thinking. That's why dominant ideologies that serve dominant groups at the expense of others are so difficult to identify and dismantle.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this book mirrors the framework for teaching digital literacies as outlined in Stuart Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. He too dedicates a section of his book to "critical literacy," which focuses on "how students might be encouraged to recognize and question the politics of computers" (75). In a similar way, the "Critical Literacy" portion of this book is dedicated to examining digital technologies and spaces that we tend to take for granted as inherently good and teasing out some of the complexities and political ramifications of our digital media practices. As we've seen throughout this section, there are a variety of ways that digital platforms can be utilized, just as there is a range of positive and negative effects that stem from the technologies we adopt and how we use them.

When we examine digital spaces from an ideological perspective, it means that we're identifying the value systems and power structures embedded in those spaces that we tend to overlook. In 1985, Melvin Kranzberg, professor and president of the Society for the History of Technology (SHOT), gave a presidential address at the Henry Ford Museum, where he outlined "truisms" about how technologies develop and the effect they have on society. The first of his "Kranzberg's Laws" was this: "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (545). In other words, digital technologies are designed by human beings with their own biases and ideologies, and those biases are reflected in the ways those technologies are used, often having the effect of benefiting certain groups of people over others. For instance, a 2016 article about algorithmic biasing demonstrates that even the math formulas that are used in the design of a program aren't neutral (Kharazian). The article looks specifically at a report about the Pokémon GO app and the fact that the vast majority of the stops on the program are situated in white neighborhoods, which in turn, made the game more accessible for white users living in those areas.

The Pokémon GO example illustrates some of the things we've already said about ideologies being embedded in digital technologies, usually in ways that are subtle, implicit, and easy to

overlook. An ideological perspective is a way of looking at digital spaces beyond your immediate needs and uses and considering other types of questions: "What is lost as well as gained? Who profits? Who is left behind and for what reasons? What is privileged in terms of literacy and learning and cultural capital? What political and cultural values and assumptions are embedded in the software?" (Selber 81). These are all questions that relate back to the affordances and constraints that we identified earlier in the chapter and the deeper questions that consider how technologies encourage certain ways of doing, meaning, relating, thinking, and being. Selber goes on to say,

> As such an uncomfortable line of questions implies, a critical approach to literacy first recognizes and then challenges the values of the status quo. Instead of reproducing the existing social and political order, which functional modes tend to [focused solely on the "how to"], it strives to both expose biases and provide an assemblage of cultural practices that, in a democratic spirit, might lead to the production of positive social change. (81)

In other words, the technologies we adopt can [perpetuate social inequalities](#) (Gaskell), but when we adopt an ideological perspective, we can expose biases and power structures and work toward effective solutions.

Once again, Selber provides a helpful framework to examine specific technologies and digital spaces. He identifies the following parameters:

- **Design cultures**—considering the values and perspectives that influence the way that technologies are designed. Do some users benefit more than others because of embedded design bias?
- **Use contexts**—looking at the ways that technologies are used in specific contexts. For instance, certain applications are sometimes required in the classroom or in the workplace in order to complete certain tasks. What are those technologies?

Why are they required over others? How do the digital technologies and policies of a place affect different groups of people in the community?

- **Institutional forces**—understanding the larger power structures that influence the technologies we adopt. What larger agendas are being served for a university or a company? Are these benefits at the expense of others in the community who have less power?
- **Popular representations**—looking at the ways specific technologies are culturally constructed. How are our assumptions about technology embedded in cultural messages? How do those representations influence the technologies we adopt? How are larger practical and ethical concerns addressed (or not)?

From an ideological perspective, aspects of digital technology relate directly to the values that get promoted in a certain space—the beliefs, assumptions, actions, and identities that are promoted as "good" or "normal." When paired with the critical exercise of considering the affordances and constraints—the types of identities, relationships, thought processes, and so on that are made possible by certain technologies as well as those that are *excluded* or *devalued*—we get a much better sense of the ideologies that are embedded in the technologies we use as well as the larger social consequences.

Activity 6.2

Consider a specific digital platform that is prominent in

your school or workplace. It might be Canvas, Google Drive, or an application that is more specific to your major.

Now examine that platform from an ideological perspective, using the parameters named in this section:

- Biases embedded in the design
- Use context
- Institutional forces
- Popular representations

Write a response to each item and then write an overall conclusion about the social values that are embedded in that platform. What are the positive and/or negative consequences for different types of users?

A Personal Perspective

In contrast to the ideological perspective that challenges you to look more broadly at the technologies we adopt and the influences those technologies have on different groups of people and value systems, a personal perspective compels you to look at the individual—the affordances and constraints of the digital platforms that you use. In contrast to the professional perspective, which we'll consider in the next section, the personal perspective doesn't relate directly to your professional endeavors, though admittedly the line between professional and personal is sometimes blurry (even more so because of digital technology). We'll be referring more specifically to the technologies that you turn to for accomplishing more personal objectives—communication with family and friends, educational pursuits, health care, and so on. While we already named some

of the personal benefits of digital communication technologies in chapter 2, this section challenges you to look at the affordances and constraints of the specific platforms that you utilize. We'll look together at some basic examples, but the idea is that you would apply the affordances and constraints framework to your own everyday practices.

Communication

There are way too many digital communication platforms to name, but some of the most common are text messaging, email, teleconferencing platforms, and specific social media sites. It will be up to you to list the platforms that are most common to you. At first glance, it's obvious that digital technologies can greatly enhance our communication practices, making it possible to stay connected with a lot more people, regardless of geographical constraints and time differences. What's more, different platforms offer different levels of intimacy, ranging from a quick text message or "like" on someone's Facebook post to the more personal and nuanced conversations we can have with someone over Zoom. The focus in this chapter, as we work with affordances and constraints, is to consider the trade-offs of the platforms you select for given tasks. Each platform offers benefits and opportunities, but as we learned from Jones and Hafner, it also forecloses other possibilities. Because communication is so pivotal to all of the items listed in Jones and Hafner's framework (i.e., your ways of doing, meaning, relating, thinking, being), it's important to think carefully about the platforms you use and the effects they have.

Let's look at one example in particular: text messaging. This seems like a pretty universal form of communication that applies to the majority of people. It's also one of the more prominent ways that people can quickly and easily communicate. So let's look at the affordances and constraints of this particular platform:

Doing. The benefit of texting is also probably obvious. It's quick to send and receive a text message. It allows for direct communication with a single person or a small group. It's also versatile, allowing users to include not just text but also emojis, pictures, and GIFs. However, there are some definite constraints to messaging that make it less ideal for other forms of communication. For instance, it isn't effective for having a conversation with a large group of people. You can't tell when someone has read your message. It's also a constraint that you can't delete a text message once it's been sent, and once it is sent, it can be copied and reshared in ways that are beyond your control.

Meaning. Text messages allow for short, basic messages that allow people to make plans, share information, and check in with one another. Because of the ability to send not only text in a message but also hyperlinks, emojis, pictures, videos, and GIFs, users are able to create deeper meanings and create quick links to more developed information. Also, because of the nature of a text thread, there is a documented history of recent messages, which makes it easy to "keep up" with the conversation. In contrast, a text message wouldn't easily support a long message. A text message also can't express the full range of emotions and meaning behind the message. It doesn't allow readers to hear the inflection in the speaker's voice or their tone, which makes it more likely to be misinterpreted.

Relating. Text messages also allow us to relate to family and friends in a convenient way, which helps facilitate healthy relationships. We can easily share information with our friends to help maintain those friendships. We can check in with family members to sustain family dynamics. Because text messages are quick, we can do this pretty easily. However, text messages would be a difficult way to sustain a deeper relationship over a long period of time. A couple in a long-distance relationship probably wouldn't feel very deeply connected with each other if they simply sent text messages back and forth. Similarly, a parent who misses their child who has gone off to college probably won't be fully satisfied with

text messages because they can't hear their child's voice or see their face. It's missing the level of intimacy that some relationships would require.

Thinking. It's interesting that as text messaging capabilities have evolved, so too have our ways of thinking about messages. For instance, it seems more prominent for people to think about their responses to a message in terms of a movie scene, which can be easily grabbed as a GIF and plugged into the text thread. People are more likely to think about their conversations in comparison to movie scenes. They're also more likely to distill larger ideas and emotional responses into a few sentences or even an emoji. All of this is to say that text messaging also constrains our thinking by forcing users to oversimplify their experiences and ideas.

Being. As already stated, text messaging is pretty universal, so it doesn't strictly limit the type of identity that a person can have. However, there are some definite identity markers that a person who writes text messages takes on: They are someone who has the income and tech savvy to own a cell phone and respond to messages. They are someone with a range of knowledge about texting conventions—the acronyms and the ability to send hyperlinks and GIFs. Often the types of emojis or GIFs that a person sends are a reflection of their identity in some way, based on their interests and personalities.

Education

Of course, digital technologies are also used for educational purposes—both formal and informal. More informal spaces like Wikipedia or Reddit provide additional information about a wide variety of topics and interests. Other platforms are used in more formal educational contexts. For instance, Canvas is a learning management system commonly used to give students access to resources, policies, and assignments for a particular course. It can

be used to supplement in-person instruction or as a hub where online videos and teleconferencing can take place. Similarly, Google Workspace for Education provides a range of communication tools that allow students and instructors to communicate, collaborate on projects, receive feedback, and so on.

It seems especially true that there is no magic bullet when it comes to ed tech. Though new platforms and applications are constantly being introduced with the promise to engage students, spark their creativity, and improve learning, the reality is that ed tech also has its trade-offs—aspects of a particular platform or program that are beneficial to the larger educational goal and then aspects that are limiting. It comes to mind, for instance, that most platforms put the instructor at a pretty significant advantage to surveil student activity. Canvas, for instance, reports when students last logged into Canvas and for how long. It gives the time stamp for when students turn in an assignment. Similarly, Google Docs allows shared users (i.e., teachers) to see the entire process of creating a document—when it was opened, what the drafting process looked like, how long it took, who else was on the document, and so on. It puts student activities under the microscope, compelling certain behaviors over others and often creating an environment of distrust and suspicion.

Further, there has been much recent discussion about data analytics intended to measure student performance for the purpose of assessing teaching practices and student learning. While this type of ed tech is most often promoted as a helpful tool, Neil Selwyn reminds us that all technologies are imbued with ideologies and that it's important to consider what those ideologies and political agendas are. He goes on to voice concerns about the reductionist process of data analytics, which simplifies rich student experiences to a couple of data points: "This relates to a broader suspicion of educational data inevitably being inaccurate, incomplete, poorly chosen, or simply a poor indicator of what it supposedly represents" (12). Similarly, Gert Biesta et al. question whether our focus on collecting data has undermined our underlying educational goals:

"The rhetorical power of the idea of 'what works'—and similar notions such as evidence-based practice or evidence-informed teaching—should not make us forget that things never work in an abstract sense and never work in a vacuum" (2). They go on to discuss the benefit of measuring student performance but argue that it can lead to a "perversion of what education is supposed to be about" when that becomes the primary goal. In other words, school systems can sometimes get so caught up in creating measurable learning outcomes that they distort the teaching practices in order to increase performance scores, regardless of whether those scores are connected to any meaningful skills.

Just as Selwyn argues against a "blind faith in data," on a broader scale, it's important to resist a "blind faith in ed tech" as we consider the range of effects of the technologies we use, their underlying ideologies, and the social consequences for different groups of people. Any digital platform that is used in the classroom should be scrutinized to understand the affordances (the things it allows in terms of doing, meaning, relating, thinking, and being) as well as the constraints (the things that are disabled and the potential negative effects).

Health Care

Another great example of how digital technology is used for personal objectives is health care. Because technologies are so often invisible, it's easy to take for granted the technologies that facilitate your medical care. However, in the last couple of decades, the medical industry has made huge shifts toward digital platforms that make it much easier for doctors to care for patients. It also makes it more convenient for patients if they want to change doctors or get specialized care. One primary example is the digitization of medical records. While this hasn't been an easy process (Badalucco), moving patient records from the standard manila folder to an electronic

format has made it much easier for doctors to access patient information, transfer records from one doctor to another, and access treatment information that will reduce medical error and increase patient outcomes. Another great example is the electronic prescription, which makes it much easier and faster for doctors to send a prescription to your preferred pharmacy. Not only is this more convenient, but the system is safer, since dosing information is automatically printed on the bottle and doctors have records of all the medications that a person is taking in order to reduce adverse effects.

The advancements in medical technologies and the correlating benefits are too numerous to list. This study by Alotaibi and Frederico looks across a wide range of medical technology advancements, such as electronic physician's orders, clinical decision support, electronic prescriptions, automated medicine-dispensing cabinets, and patient data management systems, among other things, and determined that "information technology improves patient's safety by reducing medication errors, reducing adverse drug reactions, and improving compliance to practice guidelines." Another huge shift in the health care industry came in the form of telehealth and telemedicine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). In many instances, patients can receive the same type of care from the convenience and safety of their home. The article from the CDC even mentions "remote intervention" in which surgeries can take place via robot, which reduces the direct contact between a patient and physician. There are also more automated technologies, such as medical wearables (Insider Intelligence) and digital therapeutics (Digital Therapeutics Alliance), that provide patients with a higher level of independence as well as better health outcomes.

Regarding our framework of affordances and constraints, the affordances seem obvious. These technologies provide significant opportunities to do more things—to meet with doctors, to track medical histories and personal data, and to receive prescriptions and medical interventions. They also increase the

range of meanings we can make as we adopt specialized terminology (getting your "steps" in, for instance) as well as our ways of thinking as our personal data and medical data become increasingly top of mind.

However, this critical unit of the book is about resisting utopian perspectives of technology in favor of those that examine deeper, more subtle consequences. It's easy to identify all of the benefits of medical technologies, but the reality is that these technologies are often complex and difficult to learn, which can hinder doctors' ability to focus their attention on patient needs (Gawande). What's more, these systems aren't immune to medical errors that have serious medical consequences. In fact, in some instances, they can lead to an increase in mistakes when inputting or retrieving patient information and a decrease in communication and professional consultations between doctors responsible for patient care (Coiera et al.).

Another significant challenge relates to access. Obviously, not all people have equal access to digital technologies to use this type of health care. As these technologies and medical processes become more commonplace, often replacing the old, more "hands-on" ways of doing things, there are certain populations that get left out, which leaves them vulnerable to missing out on healthcare information and interventions that would improve their health. Certainly, the digital divide is a cause for concern. Additionally, there's the reality that some medical technologies aren't designed for all users equally. For people who aren't intuitive about technologies or who don't speak English well, these technologies can also function as a barrier instead of a gateway to better health care.

Perhaps one of the most significant issues relevant to healthcare technologies is the changes in how we relate to other people. Many of the advancements identified above take out the personal touch between doctors and patients. The more intimate, social, and emotional aspect of health care is sacrificed for the sake of safety and self-preservation. Similarly, the relationship between

patients and doctors has shifted because of <u>rising costs, concerns over being sued, and a focus on unnecessary medical procedures</u>, all of which diminish the credibility of the medical industry (Shmerling).

These are just a few ways that digital technologies are used for personal use and how the framework of affordances and constraints can be applied. As you consider your own practices and the digital technologies you employ—for entertainment, shopping, or educational purposes, for instance—a deeper consideration of how these technologies affect your ways of doing, meaning, relating, thinking, and being can be extremely helpful in uncovering the consequences of that use so that you can be intentional about the choices you make.

A Professional Perspective

From a professional perspective, the framework of affordances and constraints provides a way to examine how digital technologies are employed in various jobs. As digital technology becomes increasingly pervasive, the majority of jobs require extensive use of those technologies in order to accomplish even the most basic tasks. This has obvious implications for the digital divide, as we've discussed earlier. People who are more familiar with these technologies and have access to new advancements as they emerge are better positioned to obtain more skilled jobs that require digital literacy skills, which in turn, provides financial and social benefits that accrue over time. The chasm between those with digital literacy skills and those without is particularly problematic from a professional perspective since it perpetuates the cycle of low income for certain populations. That is certainly one way of looking critically at the professional use of technology. However, this section focuses more explicitly on different types of jobs and the affordances and constraints that digital technologies bring to those

jobs—particularly to those workers who benefit in many ways from the digital technologies that make certain parts of their jobs easier and more flexible. But as we've learned throughout this unit of the book, a critical examination of technology also considers the disadvantages—the more negative outcomes that emerge as we adopt certain technologies.

Clearly, we can't focus on *all* jobs in this brief section. Instead, we'll be looking at four different categories of digital workers based on Ens et al.'s research about the affordances and constraints of "decent work." Their paper "[Decent Digital Work: Technology Affordances and Constraints](#)" examines four different types of digital workers, which refers to people whose jobs are defined by the technologies they use. While many people in their jobs might employ digital technologies to varying degrees, not all of them have been fundamentally changed because of digital technology. They say, "Digital work is then better conceived of as the type of which, which is fundamentally reconfigured through the use of digital technologies embedding increasing levels of *mobility* and *precarity*" (1; emphasis original). In other words, there are aspects of technology that are beneficial to personal autonomy because more things can be accomplished in a single day and it's easier to stay connected with clients and colleagues. It's possible to work from almost anywhere. These are all affordances, but on the flip side is the reality that the opportunity to accomplish more at work can lead to weakened boundaries between work and home life and create higher levels of stress and fatigue. Being able to work and connect with colleagues from anywhere allows for increasing levels of flexibility and personal freedom, but it can also feel confining in the fact that it's almost impossible to get away from these connections or work obligations.

Specifically, Ens et al. look at the affordances and constraints of technology for four types of digital workers:

- **The "gig" worker.** This is a freelancer who is able to piece together different projects from a variety of different

employers in order to make a living. While there is flexibility in where these people do their work and there is some freedom in being able to accept or reject a job (the affordances), there is also the need to constantly keep work coming in in order to make a living. The "gig" worker is also at a disadvantage when it comes to a lack of promotional opportunities, medical or retirement benefits, and a professional community to provide support and emotional connection.

- **The "digital nomad."** Like the gig worker, the digital nomad worker is not tied to a single employer. They are employed through contracts and are able to travel the world while they have digital meetings with clients and fulfill their contractual obligations. Unlike the gig worker, this is a "nomadic" type of person who enjoys the freedom of being able to work from anywhere and therefore spends most of their time traveling. This is obviously a huge benefit, particularly if they are able to get contractual jobs that sustain the expense of constant travel and self-indulgence. On the other hand, it's also stressful to always be looking for the next job or to sometimes have to take on multiple jobs. It's also difficult to keep a consistent work schedule while traveling and to stay connected with clients and other people. Also, there is never a truly "paid vacation" as there would be in a stable, corporate environment, which can lead to fatigue and burnout.

- **The "nine-to-fiver."** This is someone with a single employer, bound by the traditional eight-hour workday. While many nine-to-five jobs occur in an office or some other facility, the emergence of digital technology has made it increasingly possible for nine-to-fivers to work remotely from home, which provides more flexibility and convenience. However, these workers are still tied to the obligations of a single employer and don't have as much flexibility regarding their work hours. The opportunity to work remotely can also weaken workers' sense of belonging.

- **The "traveling elite."** Like a nine-to-fiver, the traveling elite

has a single employer, but their role in that company is one that requires constant travel in order to meet with clients. It's high-intensity and can be extremely rewarding (and lucrative), but it can also be exhausting, since the schedule often requires long hours. Also, these workers spend quite a bit of time in hotels and airports, which can lead to feelings of social disconnect.

While these are very broad categories that barely brush the surface of the types of technologies that different professionals use and the affordances and constraints of each one, these categories do provide a picture of how professional jobs have shifted as a result of digital technologies, providing new types of jobs as well as new opportunities within jobs that previously existed. It also underscores the reality that with every affordance (a new benefit that provides convenience and flexibility) there is a constraint (an aspect of the technology that can be limiting and isolating in some way). As you think more specifically about a profession—probably your own current or intended profession—and the technologies that are compelled within that field, this framework of affordances and constraints as well as the different types of digital work can help contextualize the consequences of those technologies.

Let's look at one example: teachers. While there are all different types of teachers at different institutions, it's true that advancements in digital technology—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—dramatically shifted the work structure for many teachers. Suddenly, they had to shift from in-person to online instruction while also making themselves available to answer questions and provide additional help in some way—either via synchronous or asynchronous instruction. Many of the technologies that have emerged made it easy for teachers to record lectures, have students do group work in digital spaces, have individual conversations with students, and provide extra resources (all affordances). However, as many students and instructors have reported, it's difficult to engage students in an online environment.

Watching (and recording) videos can be tiring, and it lacks the social/emotional connections that are afforded in the classroom. What's more, teaching became a lot more time consuming. Instead of having in-person conversations and answering questions on the spot, teachers spent a lot more time recording and uploading lectures, responding to student questions via email, grading additional assignments to check student learning, and so on. While platforms like Google Workspace, Canvas, Zoom, ScreenPal, and others allowed for education to continue (for some with access) during the pandemic, there were also numerous constraints as these technologies became more integral to the teaching/learning process.

A critical look at the technologies in the education field would look specifically at the technologies listed above and the affordances and constraints of each one, some of which are more conducive to helping students and teachers communicate than others, but which also limit personal freedom and create more emotional and cognitive strain. As you consider a range of other professions and the digital technologies that are employed, you should also examine how specific platforms are used and what the affordances and constraints are for professionals in that field.

Activity 6.3

Interview someone who is currently working in your intended profession. Your interview should focus on not just the particulars of their daily tasks and responsibilities but also the digital technologies that they employ to get their job done. Ask a range of questions about how these technologies are helpful but also how they might be

limiting or confining in some way. You should also ask broader questions about benefits and disadvantages of their job (which may or may not be connected to technology).

Based on the interview, you should write up a profile about that person and the job that they do. Next identify the primary technologies that they use in their professional role and the affordances and constraints of those technologies. How do they help with productivity, communication, professional growth, and autonomy? In what ways are they limiting?

In this first unit of the book, we've discussed critical literacy with a focus on a wide range of advantages and disadvantages that are associated with digital technologies. The hope is that these larger considerations and frameworks become part of your own intellectual process as you evaluate the technologies you use every day that have become "invisible," as you learn new technologies that are compelled for personal and professional reasons, and as you make choices about how to use those technologies. In fact, it's those commonplace, overlooked technologies that often deserve more critical awareness. In her article "Technology and Literacy: A Story About The Perils of Not Paying Attention," Cynthia Selfe argues that when technologies become "invisible" to us, they also become most dangerous because we aren't thinking critically about their implications. While you might not always have choices about certain technologies—since some will be required in the educational or professional settings you engage—it can still be incredibly important to be aware of the broader implications of technology so that you can advocate for groups of people who have been overlooked or for processes that would be more advantageous in some way. And in those situations

where you do have choices, a deeper understanding of the affordances and constraints of the technologies that are available to you will greatly enhance your effectiveness as a communicator and as someone who has a positive effect on the communities of which you are a part.

7.   Identify and explain the four elements in Selber's framework for critically analyzing digital spaces. Can you provide an example of a technology and how you might evaluate it using at least one of those elements?

8.   What are some of the personal uses of technology that this chapter considers? How can the framework of affordances and constraints be applied to other aspects that weren't explicitly discussed (entertainment or shopping, for instance)?

9.   What are the four types of digital workers identified in the chapter? How do these categories along with Jones and Hafner's concept of affordances and constraints provide a framework that can be used to consider other professions and uses of technologies?

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PART II
RHETORICAL LITERACY

7. The Everyday Function of Rhetoric

Remember that word "ubiquitous" from the introduction? It's probably a fairly obvious thing to say that digital technology is everywhere, embedded in our most basic daily tasks and often going completely unnoticed. However, following our discussions in the first section of the textbook, the hope is that you have a deeper understanding of the ubiquitous nature of digital media. Now we turn our attention from critical literacy to "rhetorical literacy." Even more pervasive than our use of digital technology is our use of rhetoric, and much like the technologies we use, rhetoric often goes unnoticed. In fact, you are *constantly* sending messages out into the world—whether it be written or verbal messages that you carefully crafted beforehand or unanticipated conversations, offhand remarks, facial expressions, or body language. Even the clothing you wear sends messages to people about who you are and what your interests, occupations, and moods might be.

Unfortunately, rhetoric is a word that is often misunderstood. People sometimes think of it as an act of manipulation—something politicians use to garner attention and increase votes, but their words don't have any real meaning. It's all "hot air." However, while this is certainly an example of rhetoric, it's nowhere near complete. In simple terms rhetoric is the art of *communication*. If you were to Google the term, the Oxford Languages would tell you that rhetoric is "the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and compositional techniques." The second definition given is "language designed to have a persuasive or effective effect on its audience, but often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content." That's the "hot air" definition described earlier. However, these definitions are both inadequate because they fail to recognize

the more subtle, everyday uses of rhetoric. While you might intentionally use rhetoric for specific occasions—a speech or a debate or an op-ed article, for instance—you also use rhetoric in the more mundane interactions you have with people all day long. You use rhetoric as you walk down the aisle at the grocery store, drive through town, or sit quietly in a classroom. You might not always be aware of the messages you are sending and the effect that you have on other people, but you are indeed using rhetoric, and the more that you are able to cultivate an awareness of rhetoric and how it functions in your everyday life, the more effective you will be in your interactions with other people—both in person and online.

The goal of this chapter is to help you understand what rhetoric is and how foundational it is to our everyday lives. Far from being an act of manipulation, rhetoric in its most useful form is about enhancing mutual understanding and respect in order to facilitate compromise, problem-solving, and healthy relationships. It's also inherently connected to your sense of identity and the way that you develop knowledge about the world. Defining rhetoric as the art of effective communication intentionally broadens the parameters of when and how we use rhetoric. It's also fairly simple, particularly compared to the definitions that other rhetoricians have given throughout history. For instance, American Rhetoric lists a number of "scholarly" definitions of rhetoric:

- "The art of enchanting the soul" (Plato).
- "The faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the means of persuasion" (Aristotle).
- "One great art comprised of five lesser arts: inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, and pronunciatio" (Cicero).
- "That art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end. The four ends of discourse are to enlighten the understanding, please the imagination, move the passion, and influence the will" (George Campbell).
- "The study of misunderstandings and their remedies" (I. A. Richards).

- "A form of reasoning about probabilities, based on assumptions people share as members of a community" (Erika Lindemann).

The list goes on, but the point is that there are a lot of different ways that we could consider rhetoric and its function. What all of these definitions have in common is a focus on purpose—what the communicator is trying to achieve as a result of their message, whether written or spoken, whether explicit or implicit. Similar to our definition of rhetoric is the one articulated by Andrea Lunsford, who defines rhetoric as "art, practice, and study of human communication" (American Rhetoric). This is also a broad definition that encompasses not only the message itself but also the academic and personal endeavor of understanding how communication works and how it can be utilized effectively.

Perhaps one more definition will be useful as we launch into this unit about rhetorical literacy and its relationship to digital communication. The [Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies](#) at San Diego State University defines rhetoric like this:

> Rhetoric refers to the study and uses of written, spoken and visual language. It investigates how language is used to organize and maintain social groups, construct meanings and identities, coordinate behavior, mediate power, produce change, and create knowledge. Rhetoricians often assume that language is constitutive (we shape and are shaped by language), dialogic (it exists in the shared territory between self and other), closely connected to thought (mental activity as "inner speech") and integrated with social, cultural and economic practices. Rhetorical study and written literacy are understood to be essential to civic, professional and academic life.

That's obviously a more complex and nuanced definition than some of the others we've reviewed, but it accurately captures the significance of rhetoric to our thought processes, our civic engagement, our relationships, our activities, and our very identities. In this first chapter of the rhetorical literacy unit, we'll

take a closer look at the elements that comprise the rhetorical situation as well as examples of rhetorical appeals that are used to enhance the effectiveness of a message. Developing a deeper awareness of these concepts will help you identify how they are used in the messages you encounter and utilize them more intentionally and effectively in the messages you send.

Learning Objectives

- Gain a broad understanding of what rhetoric is and how pervasive it is in your everyday life.
- Understand what the rhetorical situation is and the key elements that are involved.
- Consider the criteria of rhetorical discourse in contrast to other forms of speech.
- Learn how the elements of a rhetorical situation can be transferred from one circumstance to the next for a deeper analysis of effective communication.
- Examine the three main types of rhetorical appeals and how they can be applied.
- Learn more specific rhetorical strategies of rhetorical modes and rhetorical devices and how they can be used to enhance a message.
- Consider the larger functions of rhetoric in everyday conversations.

The Rhetorical Situation: Key Terms

Probably the best way to cultivate a deeper understanding of rhetoric is to consider the elements of the rhetorical situation, which was defined by Lloyd Bitzer in his 1968 essay "The Rhetorical Situation." In this essay, he considers the elements that are present when rhetorical discourse emerges—the circumstances that precipitate the message and would have an impact on how it is received. No message can be fully understood without considering the larger context, which Bitzer says is crucial in understanding the effectiveness of that message to meet its intended goal. Bitzer defines rhetoric as

> a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change. In this sense, rhetoric is always persuasive. (4)

In other words, rhetoric creates action. It has the power to influence the thoughts and behaviors of the audience in certain ways, depending on the motives of the speaker along with the message itself and the context in which that message is delivered—all elements of the rhetorical situation.

Let's back up, though, and consider the most fundamental element of rhetoric: purpose. All rhetorical discourse has a purpose, something that the speaker hopes to accomplish as a result of the message. As already discussed, this purpose might be really obvious and explicit. For instance, you might find yourself in some sort of debate about a political issue, and so you are using logical reasoning and evidence to convince your audience to agree with your position. Or you might be out with friends or family members, and you want to convince them to eat at a certain restaurant or agree to see a specific movie with you. Once again, you'd use all of your rhetorical

skills to get them to do whatever it is you are suggesting. In many other circumstances, though, the purpose might not be quite so obvious. Maybe you're out for a walk in your neighborhood and when you pass one of your neighbors, you feel compelled to stop and say hello. Maybe your neighbor is the talkative sort, and so you end up locked in a conversation for longer than you might like, but you don't want to be rude. That is also a rhetorical situation with a purpose: to maintain a friendly relationship with your neighbor. And if someone stops you and asks you for directions, your response would also be rhetorical. Your purpose would be to give clear directions so they can get where they want to go.

Every time you craft a message for an audience—whether it's an in-person conversation, an email, a text message, a "like" on Facebook, or a quick wave hello to a friend in the hallway at school—you have a purpose. It might be to persuade your audience about a particular issue or course of action, it might be to inform them about a process or a concept, or it might be to give a positive impression of yourself and cultivate or maintain social relationships. Rhetoric, then, refers to the communication strategies you use in a given situation to meet that purpose, to influence the attitudes and behaviors of your audience. This suggests, as Bitzer says, that all rhetoric is persuasive. Even if your primary purpose is to inform your audience about a topic, there is an underlying purpose to convince them that the topic is worthwhile and that you are a credible source of information. There is also the reality that one seemingly minor message could have more than one purpose, often with a social component. A teacher who gives a short lesson in class has multiple purposes—to inform students clearly about the topic, to persuade them that this is an important topic worth their time and effort, to encourage them that they are able to learn and effectively apply the material, to maintain a positive social rapport with the class so that students are engaged and more open to learning. It might be a five-minute lesson about semicolons, but the underlying rhetorical purpose is likely multifaceted and nuanced.

One important aspect of Bitzer's essay about the rhetorical

situation is his discussion of *exigence*. According to Bitzer, before a speaker has a purpose, there must be an exigence, which he defines as "an imperfection marked by urgency" (6). Or, as [Kate Mele](#) puts it, exigence is the source, the "driving force." Just like a river starts from somewhere—a spring—Mele explains that a message also starts from somewhere: the exigence. To really understand a rhetorical message and the speaker's purpose, it's crucial to understand the exigence that prompted the message. If, for example, you wake up sick one morning and can't make it into work, that's an exigence that prompts a message to your boss. Most people can't simply not show up to work. You'd have to notify a boss or coworkers in some way to avoid confusion and any potential problems that could arise from your absence. These are the imperfections—the exigence—that would compel you to send a text message to coworkers or to call in sick to your boss.

An exigence might be a problem that has already arisen that needs to be addressed. For instance, if you fail to call in sick and you receive angry text messages from your coworkers, that's a problem that has materialized and has to be addressed. Alternatively, an exigence might be a *potential* problem that could arise if you don't speak up. For instance, you'd call in sick to prevent the potential confusion and chaos that might arise from your absence. Similarly, you engage in the conversation with your neighbor, even though you don't want to, to avoid the negative consequence of making your neighbor mad or hurting their feelings. Exigence is so important because it compels the message, it informs the speaker's purpose, and the effectiveness of the message can be evaluated based on whether the exigence is resolved. In fact, according to Bitzer, rhetoric is about understanding the underlying problem and then creating discourse that can fully or partially resolve that problem. So in our example of you calling in sick to work, the exigence isn't the fact that you are sick. Calling in to your boss won't have any effect on whether or not you are sick. The exigence is the negative consequences that could arise at work that day—either in the overall workflow or in the impression that your boss and coworkers have

of you. Communicating clearly with everyone about your situation would help resolve those potential problems.

Like many other aspects of rhetoric, the idea of exigence can be fairly complex when you consider various elements of the rhetorical situation and the different perspectives involved. For one thing, there might be multiple exigencies that inform a single message. If we go back to our example above about calling in sick, one exigence would certainly relate to the more productive aspects of the workplace. Being short-staffed would mean that important tasks aren't completed or they aren't completed well. It could have an impact on production quality, customer satisfaction, sales revenue, and so on. Another exigence to the same message might be social. If you don't let others know you won't be at work, they will think of you as being lazy and inconsiderate. Those relationships might be strained the next time you see those people if you don't let them know what's going on. Another exigence might relate to your own professional success. If you don't call in, you might get fired, or you might not be seriously considered for the next raise or promotion.

Not only do multiple exigencies exist, but the very existence of an exigence is up to the interpretation of the rhetor. Whereas Lloyd Bitzer argued that the rhetorical situation compels rhetorical discourse, Richard Vatz argued that there isn't a single, objective rhetorical situation that exists outside of our individual interpretations. It's up to each individual to select the details from a particular situation that are important and then to interpret the meaning and the potential consequences of those details. Vatz says, "I would not say 'rhetoric is situational,' but situations are rhetorical; not '...exigence strongly invites utterance,' but utterance strongly invites exigence; not 'the situation controls the rhetorical response...' but the rhetoric controls the situational response" (159). In other words, we wouldn't all objectively agree that an exigence exists or that one specific response is the "right" one. Individual interpretations, values, and agendas inform how we perceive a situation and how we respond.

Once we understand the underlying exigence, which compels the purpose of the rhetorical discourse, we'd consider the other elements of the rhetorical situation to evaluate the effectiveness of the message:

- **The speaker**—the person who is sending the message. We'd probably look more closely at this person's authority on the subject, their reputation for being trustworthy, and the relationship they have with the audience. If you are someone who calls in sick all the time, for instance, then chances are your message won't be as well received by your boss because you have already created a negative impression.
- **The audience**—the intended recipients of the message. Per our definition above, the audience has the power to resolve the exigence in a rhetorical situation by adopting certain attitudes and behaviors. In that case, a closer look at the audience—their current attitudes, values, experiences, expectations, impressions of the speaker, and so on—is crucial in understanding the effectiveness of a message. If you did wake up sick and needed to let people know, your message would be very different if you were sending it to your boss as opposed to your family or friends. Your relationship with those potential audiences and their expectations are vastly different.
- **The message**—the spoken, written, or visual text that corresponds with the speaker's purpose. This is the mediating tool intended to help the target audience understand the speaker's thoughts and ideas and to compel them to respond in ways that will resolve the exigence.
- **Kairos**—the most opportune timing of a message (Pantelides). Again, this is a highly contextual element that considers the message itself as well as the location, the expectations of the audience, and other constraining factors. For instance, if you are interested in asking someone out on a date, you'd consider the appropriate moment for this type of conversation that would increase your chances of success. You'd wait until they

are in a good mood and not distracted by other conversations or tasks. You might also wait until you are with that person in a place that is fairly quiet. All of those elements relate to kairos, which would have a significant influence on the audience's response.

- **Constraints**—the "persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (Bitzer 8). Anything that could interfere with the audience's willingness to react positively to the message—whether their own beliefs and attitudes, their negative impression of the speaker, past experiences, a lack of understanding about key concepts or cultural values—is considered a constraint. Though not all constraints can be overcome, the key to a successful message is often the speaker's ability to predict and craft their message to overcome as many constraints as possible.
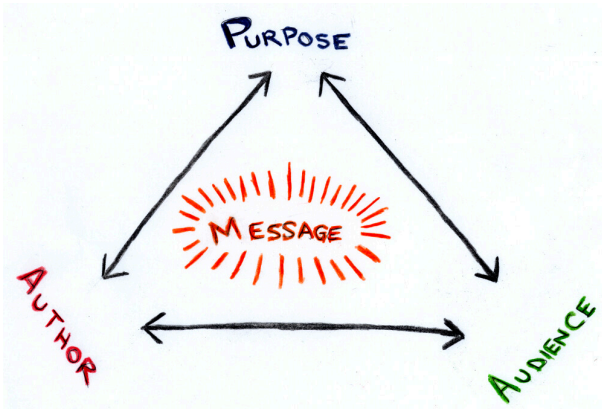
Rhetorical Triangle, by Ted Major, on Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)

These are but a few of the elements that are present in any rhetorical situation. Other considerations might include the medium that the speaker uses to communicate the message (be it

with spoken language, sign language and gestures, an email, etc.),
the genre of the message (with standard conventions that might
dictate things like format, organization, and tone of the message),
and the larger historical and social context that influences the way
that an audience would interpret a message. What is important to
keep in mind is that while all of the specific details of a rhetorical
situation are unique, the elements themselves are always present.
There will always be a speaker, a message, an exigence, a purpose,
and so on, and your ability to identify and carefully consider these
elements will equip you to more effectively craft a message that
anticipates potential constraints and persuades your intended
audience.

Activity 7.1

Summarize a handful of conversations you've had
today—with friends, coworkers, teachers, acquaintances.
They might be in person, or they might be text messages,
emails, phone calls, and so on. Describe what the
conversation was about and then see if you can identify
some of the elements of the rhetorical situation: speaker,
audience, message, purpose, exigence, kairos, and
constraints.

Pay close attention to your own purpose in these
conversations as well as the exigence that provoked your
response and any constraints that might have existed to
prevent you from meeting your goal. What does a closer
examination of these conversations say about rhetoric and
how it functions in your everyday life?

Rhetorical Strategies

We've been talking pretty broadly about the message that emerges as a response to some sort of exigence, but the message itself is the most important aspect of rhetoric. It's the force that allows for the expression of ideas and a deeper connection with other people. It compels attitudes and behaviors that provide tangible solutions to real problems. Often the study of rhetoric requires a deeper examination of the message that is produced and how it is fitting (or not) for a given audience in a particular situation. In that case, we'd look at the rhetorical strategies of the message—the way that the message is crafted in order to help the speaker inform and/or persuade the audience.

There are many different types of strategies that we could look at. In this section, we'll look at three primary groupings that can be particularly helpful when you are evaluating the effectiveness of a message, including your own. The first set of strategies are called rhetorical appeals, which were introduced by Aristotle in 350 BC in his classic work *Rhetoric I & II* ([Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)). In it, he set forth three broad types of persuasive appeals:

1. ***Logos*** refers to logic. We might try to persuade someone based on logical reasoning, principles of cause and effect, statistics, and other forms of evidence. A sound argument is one that clearly lays out the reasons for the argument and clearly articulates that line of reasoning with strong evidence. It makes explicit connections between the evidence, the reasoning, and the larger claim. It might also examine counterarguments and use the same type of evidence and logical reasoning to refute opposing views. Particularly in academic writing, logos is considered the strongest appeal because it demonstrates a high level of critical thinking and it comes to a conclusion based on an examination of the issue

itself. Digital writers also use logos when they use hyperlinks to show supporting evidence, explain how a particular process or concept works, give examples, and provide statistical evidence, often in the form of pie charts or bar graphs.

2. **Pathos** refers to emotion. This type of appeal tries to persuade readers to adopt a specific attitude or take action in some way based on an emotional response that is invoked in the message. Advertisements are often based around pathos appeals, with pictures of people who are having fun or benefiting in some way from a particular product or service, thus creating feelings of desire in the target audience, who want to experience those same benefits. Other messages might try to invoke feelings of anger or pity or fear to incite specific behaviors in the audience. An ad seeking donations for the Humane Society would likely show pictures of cute puppies and kittens. Political ads often use misleading statistics and outright fabrications to get audiences to feel angry about the opposing candidate. While pathos appeals are sometimes used to manipulate or distract audiences, there are positive uses of pathos, too, that help audiences get a deeper sense of understanding and empathy for people and problems outside of their personal experience. Narratives and descriptions are often used as pathos appeals that help audiences emotionally connect to a message. Digital writers use pathos not only in their language but also with pictures, videos, and even color choices that reinforce certain emotions.

3. **Ethos** refers to credibility. This has everything to do with the speaker and how much the target audience trusts this person to provide accurate and reliable information on the topic at hand. The ethos appeal is often threefold. (1) Phronesis: The wisdom, experience, and credentials of the speaker. Do they have personal and/or expert knowledge about the topic? Is this person an expert in a particular field and/or has done extensive research on this topic. (2) Arête: The personal virtues, ethics, and character of the speaker. Is this an honest

and ethical person? (3) Eunoia: Goodwill exhibited toward the audience. Does the speaker seem to have the audience's best interest in mind? An audience is more likely to believe and respond positively to a person whom they trust based on that person's past behaviors, their reputation, and perhaps their position as an established leader. While a message can't always overcome an audience's negative impression of the speaker, there are definite ways to build credibility by demonstrating sound evidence and research (expertise) and by crafting a message in a way that comes across as genuine and transparent (ethics). Digital writers might also develop ethos by displaying specific certifications or awards, customer testimonials, and pictures that demonstrate professional excellence or personal ethics.

While some people think of these rhetorical appeals as being antiquated—perhaps since they are Greek words that date back to Aristotle—their importance really can't be overstated. Nearly all rhetorical discourse fits into at least one of these categories, though they aren't mutually exclusive. (A *logos* appeal might also be an *ethos* appeal. Using evidence from a recent study, for instance, provides logical support for an argument while also building your credibility as a knowledgeable researcher.) And since all rhetoric revolves around specific purposes that solve existing or potential problems, these rhetorical appeals are the building blocks of discourse that have real consequences in the world. In fact, as we progress through the remainder of the textbook, we'll often refer back to these appeals as guiding principles for effective digital writing.

The next group of rhetorical strategies that we'll examine are the [modes of discourse](#), which are more specific categories that fit under the larger umbrella of the logos, pathos, and ethos appeals. These are methods of communicating different types of information so that the audience can more fully understand the intended meaning. They provide methods you can use to clarify

vague concepts or events with information that is specific and concrete. As outlined in Jenifer Kurtz's chapter on "Rhetorical Modes," they are

- **Narration**—telling a story or anecdote, often with the goal of helping readers connect emotionally with the main character and/or understand how an event unfolded.
- **Description**—using sensory details that make a particular setting or object more vivid for readers, so they can more fully picture what it looks like, feels like, and so on.
- **Process**—giving readers step-by-step details about how something works or how they can accomplish a specific task.
- **Illustration and exemplification**—demonstrating a concept or idea through the use of evidence or examples.
- **Cause and effect**—describing why something happened and/or what the consequences of an event or action might be.
- **Compare and contrast**—helping audiences more fully understand a concept or object by describing how it is similar to or different from something they are already familiar with.
- **Definition**—giving a statement of meaning for a particular term or idea.
- **Classification**—organizing parts of a larger whole into categories to help readers understand similarities and differences between them.

As you can see, each rhetorical mode, depending on how it's used, could be classified as a type of rhetorical appeal. A narrative, for instance, is often used as a pathos appeal—to get audiences to connect with a particular character and the circumstances they are facing more fully and emotionally. Similarly, clear description could be used to compel certain emotions in audiences (a pathos appeal), and it might also be used to provide clarity and imply further logical connections (a logos appeal). The main point here is that so much of the communication we do—in spoken word and in writing—is built around these rhetorical modes,

which become the building blocks of larger rhetorical appeals that—if crafted well—help the speaker to meet their communication goals. We'll look more specifically at the rhetoric of digital writing in a later section, but suffice it to say for now that digital writing is also built from rhetorical strategies, though there are quite a few more tools at your disposal to engage audiences and build meaning.

The final group of communication strategies that we'll discuss are called rhetorical devices, which refer to a way of using language for persuasive purposes. Whereas the rhetorical modes we discussed above relate more to the content of a message, a rhetorical device is often more about word choice. It's a way of phrasing a particular idea in order to increase the audience's engagement as well as their emotional reaction. In fact, rhetorical devices are sometimes called "slanters" because they put a certain spin on a message—either positive or negative—to make audiences feel a certain way. Rhetorical devices are typically emotional (pathos) appeals, sometimes intended to help audiences engage on a deeper level with a topic and sometimes—in the case of a slanter—intended to manipulate their emotions or distract them from the logical (or illogical) aspects of a message.

The list of rhetorical devices is extensive (Merriam-Webster)—way beyond what we could practically study in one chapter—but it might be worth looking at a few examples to demonstrate how common they are and the persuasive effect they can have:

- **Simile**—a comparison using "like" or "as." This is a common device that has clear connections to the compare-and-contrast rhetorical mode identified above. However, whereas the mode would provide a deeper discussion of the similarities and differences between two or more things, a simile is a simple phrase and is often used to create positive or negative associations. For instance, saying that a political candidate was "grasping for words like a drowning man clinging to driftwood" puts the politician in a more negative light, making them seem

desperate.

- **Metaphor**—a comparison that doesn't use "like" or "as." A metaphor can't be taken literally, which requires the audience to recognize that it's a figure of speech, implying a comparison. For example, saying that one of your friends "didn't pull any punches" in a recent conversation with you is (hopefully) a metaphor. It doesn't literally mean that your friend was hitting you. It's a comparison that implies your friend wasn't trying to spare your feelings.
- **Euphemism**—making a topic that is negative or neutral seem more positive than it is. For instance, instead of calling someone "stubborn" (a fairly negative term), calling them "tenacious" or "determined" puts a more positive spin on it. Similarly, instead of selling "used cars," a car dealership will often refer to them as "pre-owned vehicles," which has a slightly more positive ring to it.
- **Dysphemism**—making a topic that is positive or neutral seem more negative than it is. For instance, calling one of your teachers a "dictator" would obviously put that person in a more negative light. A person who calls their spouse a "ball and chain" is also using a dysphemism that makes their spouse and their marriage seem confining.
- **Hyperbole**—extreme exaggeration, typically for dramatic effect to demonstrate the importance or significance of something. Saying that you could have "died" of embarrassment at a particular moment emphasizes the significance of your feelings and would probably garner more sympathy from your audience.

The list goes on. It can sometimes be really helpful to know the various rhetorical devices so that you can identify them when they are used in a conversation. However, more important than knowing the specific terms is being able to recognize how language is used in a given situation to elicit specific emotions and how those emotional responses benefit the speaker. Obviously, not all

rhetorical devices are negative. They can be used in positive ways to capture an audience's attention and demonstrate the significance of a particular idea. Also, when used well, a rhetorical device can be extremely effective in persuading an audience. However, rhetorical devices *can* be used to manipulate or distract, and when they come across as melodramatic or underhanded, then they have the opposite effect, often diminishing the credibility of the speaker in addition to dissuading the audience. For that reason, understanding how rhetorical devices are used and for what purpose is helpful as you interpret and respond to messages and as you craft your own.

Activity 7.2

Collect a handful of various digital messages. These might include an email you have received, text messages, blog posts, social media posts, and so on. Try to make each one different in terms of the platform and what you perceive to be the purpose of the message.

Now consider the rhetorical strategies that are used in each message. You might begin by simply labeling the broad rhetorical appeals—logos, pathos, and ethos—remembering that a given text could use more than one appeal. Then drill down into each category. Can you identify specific rhetorical modes that are used to engage the audience or clarify information? Can you identify specific rhetorical devices?

Finally, consider whether each message is effective based on its use of the various appeals. Which strategies enhance the meaning and persuasiveness of a given message? Which ones are ineffective because they are unclear, illogical, or

clearly manipulative? What other strategies might have been used to make the message more effective?

The Ubiquitous Nature of Rhetoric

So back to where we started: rhetoric is everywhere, all the time. This chapter was designed to demonstrate this point more fully (using a blend of logos and ethos appeals) and to underscore the importance of the messages you send as well as the complexity of a given rhetorical situation. While many situations might call for very intentional and thoughtful attention to the rhetorical elements that should influence the way that a message is crafted and how audiences might react (a marriage proposal, for instance, or a public speech or sermon), there are many rhetorical situations that materialize each day that we are prone to overlook because they might seem insignificant. We might not even identify them as a rhetorical situation because they are so informal, low-stakes, or brief. However, the reality is that every time a message is conveyed to an audience—whether it is intentional or not, whether it is planned beforehand or not—it is a rhetorical situation with an exigence, a purpose, and a reaction from the audience. A quick text message, a wave to someone that you know, and your body language as you sit in class or in a meeting are all examples of rhetorical messages that can result in positive or negative consequences depending on the context of the situation and the audience's interpretation of the message.

Having a clearer understanding of rhetoric and how it can unfold in both the big and the small moments will, at the very least, help you see how rhetoric functions in your everyday life. In fact, so many of the things that you strive to accomplish rely on rhetoric.

All of your social relationships are built on and largely consist of rhetorical messaging. Similarly, your ability to effectively send and interpret messages has a direct impact on whether you pass a class, get a job, pay your bills on time, buy or sell a house or a car, enjoy a night out with your friends, and so on. If you were to track your conversations throughout the course of a day or a week and then consider the rhetorical implications of each one, you'd see that even the most mundane exchange with someone helps you work toward larger goals. Here are some examples of how rhetoric functions in your everyday life:

- **To complete a task**. You rely on clear messaging with your boss/coworkers and or your teachers/peers in order to complete work tasks and larger projects. You receive messaging that details deadlines and other requirements for assignments, and you send messages in order to clarify those instructions, work with peers/colleagues on projects, and interact with customers. Even minor tasks like renewing your driver's license or filling a grocery order require rhetorical discourse.
- **To forge and maintain social relationships**. These are often more mundane, seemingly meaningless text messages and informal conversations that you have—sometimes with close friends and family and sometimes with acquaintances and even strangers. These interactions are also persuasive, meant to facilitate people's positive impressions of you and to create feelings of connectedness and care. Even minor interactions with strangers, in which you let someone get in front of you at the grocery checkout or you tell the McDonald's drive-thru attendant to have a great day, are social interactions that encourage goodwill and create momentary connections.
- **To express yourself**. Often you speak up in order to express an idea or an emotion. Sometimes, this might overlap with other functions of getting work done or forging social connections. Self-expression might seem like a more personal discourse

that doesn't relate to rhetoric, but when you have an audience, it's rhetorical—often for the sake of being heard and understood. Even when you are expressing feelings and ideas that won't be positively received by your audience, there is still the underlying goal of being part of a conversation and sharing your perspective.

- **To solve problems**. Rhetorical discourse can be used to identify a problem and to work through the potential solutions and consequences with others who are involved. This is also a social exchange, since it involves working through different perspectives and finding solutions that will appease everyone.
- **To learn**. In this case, you receive messages, ask clarifying questions, and produce texts that apply specific concepts in order to develop your understanding of a given subject.
- **To receive a personal benefit**. You use rhetoric to persuade audiences to act in your favor. Maybe you get pulled over, and you use rhetoric to dissuade the officer from issuing you a ticket. Or you missed an assignment deadline, and you convince your teacher or your boss to let you turn it in a couple of days late.
- **To benefit others**. In this case, you would speak up in some way to help other people. Maybe you clearly explain a concept or an idea to someone who is trying to learn, so you take the time to help them understand. Or perhaps you defend the viewpoint of a person or a group in order to defend their rights or interests.

These are a few examples of how rhetoric functions in deeper ways in our everyday lives, helping us work toward big-picture objectives in our personal, civic, and professional lives. When put into that larger context, it becomes clear that a conversation is never just a meaningless conversation. There are larger objectives at stake, and having a clear understanding of what those objectives are and how they stem from rhetorical discourse will aid in your success.

Track your conversations for an entire day, or maybe several days in a row, even the ones that seem minor. Write down some basic elements of the rhetorical situation—speaker, audience, message, exigence, purpose. At the end, review your data and look for larger patterns in these conversations, perhaps related to the functions identified above or other "functions" or types of objectives that you identify. Many conversions have more than one function, so be sure to give all of the appropriate labels.

Write a brief response that explains the different functions that you identified and how some of the smaller conversations you had work toward those larger goals.

Discussion Questions

1. What is a rhetorical situation? What are the key elements that are involved? Can you use those key elements to demonstrate an example of a rhetorical situation you've encountered recently?
2. What does Bitzer mean when he says that rhetoric can alter reality? How does rhetorical discourse alter reality? How does this view of rhetoric relate to

Bitzer's definition of exigence?

3. What does Vatz mean when he says, "Meaning is not discovered in situations, but created by rhetors"? Can you think of an example in which two people might interpret the exigence differently?

4. Define kairos and explain how it relates to the effectiveness of rhetorical discourse.

5. What are some possible constraints that can influence the success of a message?

6. Define the three rhetorical appeals and give examples of each one.

7. What does it mean that the rhetorical appeals might overlap in a particular message? Can you give an example?

8. What are the rhetorical modes of discourse? How do they relate to the rhetorical appeals?

9. What is a rhetorical device and how does it relate to the rhetorical appeals? Define two to three rhetorical devices that aren't defined in this chapter but are identified on the [Merriam-Webster website](#). Give your own example for each device that you select.

10. How do even small conversations fit into the larger definition of rhetoric? How does all rhetorical discourse work toward larger objectives?

11. The definition of rhetoric given by the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego University says that "we shape and are shaped by language." Explain what you think that means.

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8. Rhetoric as a Social Tool

Let's begin this chapter with a key premise that is embedded in communication studies and throughout this textbook: all language is social. It's a complex tool that we learn through our interactions with other people, and we use it in collaboration with others to exchange ideas and facilitate action. You've probably heard people say that they aren't "social," meaning that they tend to be more introverted, preferring not to interact with other people outside of their intimate circle. Certainly, that's one way of thinking about "social"—the personality trait that compels some people to seek out human interaction and to continually expand their circle of relationships. However, for our purposes, that is a pretty limited definition of "social" because it focuses on individual personalities instead of the ordered social systems of which we are all a part.

In this chapter, "social" refers more broadly to human relationships and organizational structures. By nature, humans are social creatures, seeking out relationships that provide a sense of connection, purpose, and identity. And as we discussed at length in the previous chapter, our relationships are facilitated by rhetoric. The ways that we receive, interpret, and send messages (whether explicit or implicit, whether verbal or nonverbal) have a direct influence on how our relationships with other people develop, grow, and shift. In fact, our relationships are defined by our common terminology (e.g., "friend," "mom," "teacher," "spouse"), which carries shared expectations of meaning and appropriate behaviors. We also tend to view our relationship with another person as a compilation of our interactions—a series of symbolic, rhetorical activities that give shape to our view of that relationship and our role in it. Taken as a whole, our relationships determine our sense of self, our daily activities and priorities, and our long-term goals. They are also responsible for the way that we perceive and respond to "reality."

This chapter explores the inherent social function of

rhetoric, taking a deeper look at the effects that language has on an individual and cultural level. While the last chapter provided a glimpse at the different ways that rhetoric can function in our everyday lives, this chapter affirms that every rhetorical interaction, though it may serve a variety of other objectives, is steeped in preexisting social systems that shape and reinforce meaning. Examining these influences will provide valuable insights into the social nuances that exist in our daily interactions and the way that language is used to demonstrate our belonging to various groups, which in turn increases our persuasive effect.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the social function of language that is fundamental to every message.
- Consider the symbolic nature of language and the ways that words and other symbols are encoded and decoded to provide meaning and social connection.
- Review the concept of mediation and the ways that language is not only shaped by our thought processes and ideas but able to directly influence our thought processes as well.
- Learn about the ways that language is used to express our identity and belonging in different groups, which reinforces social connection and strengthens our persuasive ability.
- Learn about how language is a tool for social intervention to either reinforce or alter our symbolic categories and how that type of intervention can create tangible change in the world.

- Consider how effective communication hinges on effective listening, including best practices regarding civil discourse and rhetorical listening.
- Understand the complex nature of communication and the reasons why disconnect occurs.
- Consider the ways that digital spaces can exacerbate disconnect as well as the affordances of digital spaces that can be used to facilitate mutual understanding.

Language As...

The function of language can't be overstated. It's our connection to the world and shapes our perceptions of every experience we have. We've already discussed the fact that language is an inherently social tool, even in moments when it might not be so obvious. For instance, language is obviously social when you are in what we might commonly consider "social situations," where you are making plans with or are already out with friends. Maybe one of your coworkers invites you to a birthday party, and suddenly you have to navigate what might seem like an uncomfortable "social situation" because you are shifting from a professional to a more personal relationship with this person. However, the reality is that every interaction you had with that person, even in the more "professional" setting, was also social simply because you had to utilize language to come to a shared meaning. You might have sent an email to this person about a particular task, or maybe you filled out a specific form that is standard to your workplace that this person received and then acted upon. These are all social

interactions because you are endeavoring to communicate an idea to another person, and you are relying on shared cultural tools—that is, language and perhaps company terminology and the understanding of how the "form" is supposed to work—to get those ideas across. This section explores the many ways that language is inherently social.

Language as Symbolic

On a fundamental level, language consists of symbols that are socially constructed and understood, which makes it possible to communicate ideas to others. A symbol is a representation. It's not the thing itself; it stands in for concepts and ideas. For instance, the word "pizza" isn't the pizza itself; it's the symbol that has been created to represent the idea of pizza, and when you use that word with someone who knows what the symbol means, then you have a shared understanding. And you can use other symbols like "16-inch," "meat-lovers," and "thin crust" to further specify your meaning. As explained by the [University of Minnesota Libraries](), a system of symbols is called a "code," which provides limitless opportunities to create meaning through the combination of symbols (encoding) for others to decipher (decoding). These codes are "ever-changing" as words and other types of symbols emerge and adapt to reflect new cultural contexts and communication needs. Codes are also flexible, allowing us to reference abstract concepts and ideas as well as objects and events that are removed from our immediate surroundings by time and/or space. This aids our ability to think deeply about a concept and to express complex ideas to others. The [Social Science LibreText library]() explains it like this: "Language is based on complex rules relating spoken, signed, or written symbols to their meanings. What results is an indefinite number of possible innovative utterances from a finite number of elements." The point is that language is a social tool that is learned through social

interaction. Words have meaning because they've been assigned meaning, and through the process of language acquisition, we've learned what those meanings are and how to use them to participate effectively in conversations with other people.

Language as Mediator

As discussed in chapter 6, language is the tool that mediates our thoughts and feelings so that we can express them to other people. It's the bridge that forges connections between you and your family, your friends, your coworkers, and even the strangers that you interact with throughout the day. Yes, this includes more in-depth conversations you might have with someone to work through a problem, but it also includes the high-five you give one of your friends in the hallway to reinforce your friendship, the quick selections that you make with your phone to put items in your "shopping cart" and to finalize your purchase, and the use of your turn signal to let other drivers know you want to change lanes. These are all outward expressions through the use of symbols, of internal feelings and desires, which allow other people to understand your meaning and respond appropriately. Interestingly, there is research that suggests a [reciprocal relationship](#) between language and our thoughts (Lumen Learning, "Language and Thinking"). Not only do our thoughts give shape to the language that we use, but our language also has a significant impact on our thought patterns and our ways of processing information.

Language as Identification

Language is also used to express our identity and align ourselves with other people. Kenneth Burke theorized that we naturally seek

out ways to relate to other people through parts of our identity that we have in common, and we use language to demonstrate to ourselves and others our membership in specific groups based on those commonalities. Essentially, the social function of language revolves around our ability to persuade others—by adopting specific language patterns and expressing our shared perspectives and values—that we are similar to them, that we belong to the group, which in turn builds our credibility. For instance, a lot of people bond over their shared interest in a particular sports team. They talk about the players. They discuss the team's record and other statistics. They rehash highlights from the most recent game, and they speculate on what will happen next week. They wear fan gear, and they cheer during the games. All of this demonstrates their identity as part of the fan group, persuading others that they belong because of their sports knowledge and the high value they place on the success of their team.

Similar to Burke's "identification" is the concept of a discourse community—groups that share specific goals and have particular ways of communicating with one another as they work toward those goals (Lumen Learning, "Discourse Communities"). Most people belong to multiple discourse communities. For instance, people in a particular field of study are in a discourse community, often interacting with one another to grow their own knowledge or to further advance the field itself. Their ways of communicating—using specific terms, often communicating in specific genres, demonstrating shared standards and values—are specialized, meaning that people outside of the group would likely feel confused and somewhat alienated. Similarly, people who work for a particular organization are in a discourse community, using specialized forms of communication as they work together to run the company. Within that company, people who work in a specific department are in a discourse community, communicating in specific ways about specific things that other departments don't. And so forth. You might be in a discourse community as part of a sports team, an interest group, a church, a class, and so on. Like

Burke's concept of identification, people in discourse communities demonstrate their belonging by adopting the communication patterns of the group, which is something that they learn to do over time as they interact with other, more experienced members.

Language as Social Intervention

One final way that we might consider the social nature of language is its ability to persuade others to take some sort of action or to adopt a particular perspective. Opt and Gring call this "social intervention," and they relate it directly to language and the way that we assign meaning using symbols: "When we name, we symbolically categorize experience. We compare experience to the symbolic categories that our language community has created to communicate about experience. We select the category into which the experience seems to fit. Then we use the symbol associated with that category to talk about your experience" (Opt and Gring 40). According to this view, our way of naming and interpreting experience reflects our ideology, the broader theory we use to assign meaning to events. When we socially intervene, we attempt to persuade others to assign the same meaning to things that we do, either by maintaining their current perspective or by adopting a new one. If we want others to "recategorize" a particular thing, "we emphasize how experience no longer fits the expectations associated with the current way of naming it" (Opt and Gring 54). We continually negotiate and renegotiate meaning as we interact with others, which has a direct impact on our ways of seeing, understanding, relating, and acting in the world.

Rhetorical Listening

Unfortunately, when people think about rhetoric, there tends to be a focus on the self. "How can rhetoric help further *my* goals? What key points should I make in order to persuade my audience to see my perspective." The problem with this mindset is that it ignores the other half of effective communication, which is *listening*. Most likely you've been in conversations that go around in circles because nobody is truly listening to each other. When emotions run high, particularly when we're convinced that we are "right," we're much more likely to speak over the other person or maybe to scoff or roll our eyes while they are talking. Some people might *seem* like they are listening based on their body language and head nods, but in reality, they are biding their time, perhaps planning out what they are going to say next once the other person stops talking. That's not effective communication because it undermines our ability to understand where the other person is coming from and to reexamine our own thinking as we work toward solutions. Also, it's incredibly difficult to get someone else to listen to what you have to say when you don't extend the same courtesy. Yes, it's a very basic skill—listening when other people are talking—that probably extends all the way back to kindergarten, but pay attention to some of the conversations around you, and you'll discover that a lot of people are bad at listening, often because they are distracted by their phones and other digital devices.

Before we unpack the concept of rhetorical listening and the significant influence it can have on a conversation, let's review the concept of [civil discourse](). In this context, the word "civil" means respectful and engaged. It means that during a conversation when another person is speaking, even when they are sharing viewpoints that directly conflict with your own, you show them respect as an engaged audience member who is going through the intellectual process of trying to understand their point of view and work toward solutions that are mutually beneficial (American University). At its

most basic level, civil discourse is a calm and rational discussion where you would

- Wait for the other person to finish speaking before you respond.
- Give that person your full attention, with eye contact and head nods that show you are listening.
- Be respectful with your body language. Don't roll your eyes or scoff. Similarly, you'd avoid facial expressions and body language that come across as threatening.
- Ask clarifying questions to be sure that you fully understand what the person has said. It's also common to rephrase some of their main points in your own words.
- Keep a calm demeanor when you do respond. Avoid yelling, being sarcastic, or speaking with a sharp tone.
- Stay focused on the issue and base your responses on logical reasoning and honest feelings. Avoid attacking the other person or responding in a way that is manipulative, irrelevant, or melodramatic.

Basically anything that encourages open dialogue and makes room for alternative ideas and opinions is civil discourse. It certainly doesn't mean that you have to agree with other people or ignore your own feelings and perspectives. Instead, civil discourse seeks to uncover disagreement for the purpose of understanding and resolving conflict.

While civil discourse can be an effective way to engage with another person and resolve conflict, rhetorical listening takes the process a step further because it requires you to attend more fully to the complex human experience and feelings of the other person, even going so far as to consider the intention behind their message and the underlying emotions that they might not be able to fully express. Krista Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as "a stance of openness that any person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (1). Ratcliffe focuses especially on "cross-

cultural" identifications, which require the listener to actively identify their own "disidentifications" and biases that act as a barrier to fully understanding what another person is saying and where they are coming from. In other words, we don't ignore the differences between ourselves and the speaker. Instead, we consider what those differences are and interrogate how they would naturally lead to different ways of thinking, speaking, and experiencing the world: "The result of such understanding is a broader cultural literacy, which affords us opportunities for negotiating our daily attitudes and actions, our politics and ethics" (Ratcliffe 300). It's impossible to ever really step outside of our individual lens, but when we listen rhetorically with the intention to truly see the other person and their point of view, we recognize that other valid perspectives exist outside of our own, and we make a genuine effort to understand those perspectives.

So the difference between civil discourse and rhetorical listening is one of intent. There is a deeper focus on seeing the other person more fully, and there's more "risk" involved that *you*, not just the other person, might change your opinions and attitudes as a result. In his TED Talk called "The Power of Listening," William Ury says that real listening requires a shift in focus from our own perspectives and potential responses to the perspectives and experiences of the person who is speaking. "We listen from their frame of reference, not just ours," which means that we not only listen to the words that are being said but "to what's behind the words" (Ury 6:44). It's a conscious effort to step into the other person's point of view, which puts the focus, at least momentarily, on their underlying needs and emotions, not your own motives and persuasive strategies that might change *their* mind. The benefits of this kind of listening are obvious, but they are also really significant:

1. It allows you to more fully understand the other person's position, which will facilitate deeper insights and personal growth.
2. It builds deeper social connections and trust between you and

that person. Instead of being a disagreement that creates tension and distance between you and the other person, rhetorical listening demonstrates care for the other person and can go a long way in strengthening a relationship.

3. It brings you closer to "yes," according to Ury. By that, he means that the other person, once they have felt heard, will be more likely to listen to you. That's not to say that you're interested in simply being "right" or getting your own way. Following a genuine effort on both sides to listen and understand, you're more likely to identify a solution that is mutually beneficial.

Activity 8.1

Identify a personal experience that was significant to you in some way. It should be something that you remember well, including contextual circumstances as well as the details of the event. It could be a happy memory, or it might be a more negative experience in which you were disappointed, embarrassed, vulnerable, or scared.

Work with a partner and share your stories with each other. As the other person is describing their own meaningful experience, give them your full attention and listen to really try to understand that experience from their perspective. You can jot down notes while they are speaking and ask follow-up clarifying questions that would help you understand the details of the event and the feelings that your partner experienced.

Once both of you have shared, then take some time to

write down their story. It could be told in first person (as if it's being told from their point of view), or you could stay in third person. The important thing is to tell the story accurately, with the details and descriptions that would help other people clearly understand the event. You should also focus on telling the story in a way that is compelling and that demonstrates the significance and the range of emotions your partner experienced. The goal is to help other readers understand and empathize with your partner as the main character in the story.

Digital Spaces and Rhetorical (Dis)Advantages

Thus far in the chapter, we've emphasized the fact that language is a *social* tool, created by humans with the purposes of communicating and connecting with other human beings in a variety of ways. But it's also inherently limited in its ability to fully communicate the complexity of our experiences and ideas. And it requires careful interpretation and negotiation as people make progress (or not) toward mutual understanding. How many times do misunderstandings happen because we misinterpret what another person is saying or what their intended meaning is? The reality is that we probably *never* interpret the meaning of a message the exact same way as someone else because we all bring a complex layering of experiences and values to a conversation, which will naturally influence what we pay attention to and what we take away from a conversation. Similarly, we all have our own unique ways of experiencing, seeing, thinking about, and speaking about

the world around us, which direct the ways that we encode and decode messages.

These moments of misunderstanding are examples of disconnect, in which we don't fully share the same meaning of an experience or a message as someone else. Our interpretations and ways of speaking about a particular event or idea don't align with someone else's, which if left unresolved, can lead to confusion, frustration, and alienation. You've probably experienced disconnect with someone else where it's obvious that you aren't seeing eye to eye about an event or an issue, in which case, you know that it can sometimes be difficult to clearly understand someone else's point of view because yours seems so clear and obvious. It's easy to assume that the other person is the one with the wrong perspective and that if we could just explain it to them, then they would "get it." While that might be the case sometimes—or the reverse might be the case sometimes and you are the one who doesn't get it—the reality is that disconnect is complex. In his 1950 article titled "Is Anybody Listening?" author and journalist William Whyte said, "The great enemy of communication...is the illusion of it" (174). In other words, we might *believe* that the meaning of a message is clear and obvious, which then prevents us from providing clarity or seeking to understand how someone else interpreted a message, which in turn widens the gap between us and another person. Being aware that people interpret messages differently—based on a complex layering of past experiences, elements of identity, values and personal interests, previous knowledge of a given subject, and unique ways of using and understanding language—increases our odds of extending the conversation and being more attentive to areas where misunderstandings might occur.

There are some unique challenges that come with trying to communicate clearly in digital spaces. For one thing, there is a barrier in time and space between you and your audience. For instance, text messages often aren't immediate. They unfold over the course of an hour or maybe several hours while you are going other places and doing other things. It's easy to lose track of the

conversation or fail to provide your full attention. There's also the reality that in many digital spaces, communication is lacking some of the rich details that help us to more fully interpret the meaning. Things like facial expressions, body language, vocal inflection, and tone of voice all provide important cues for listeners, which are largely absent in written texts like emails, text messages, blog articles, and so on. What's more, digital communication has quickly evolved to include an ever-expanding array of emojis, acronyms, and GIFs, which rely on shared cultural knowledge and individual interpretations. Studies by [Miller](), [Miller et al.](), and Jiang et al. ("[The Perfect One]()" and "[Understanding Diverse Interpretations]()") discuss the complex messages that are often embedded in simplified forms, such as emojis and GIFs, which can increase the likelihood of misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Even when there are rich cues—in images and videos, for instance—communication tends to be one-way, without the ability for the speaker to gauge audience understanding or for listeners to ask clarifying questions or share their own perspectives.

In relation to our previous discussion about rhetorical listening, digital communication can make it harder to see the person behind the message—the complex feelings and human needs that motivate a conversation. This type of listening that attends to the person behind the message and reads between the lines to understand what's *not* being said is an incredibly nuanced skill, and it relies on a certain amount of empathy. Unfortunately, a screen creates a barrier of time and space that makes it harder to "see" the other person, especially for social media posts and blogs that are meant for a broad audience. It's easy to forget about the flesh-and-blood person who created that content, which makes it more likely that we will respond in ways that are careless and self-centered. In fact, Emiliana Simon-Thomas, the science director at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, says that screen time can [erode our ability to experience empathy](), largely because the immediate, in-person nuances of a conversation get lost (qtd. in UC newsroom). Having empathy to truly listen to someone in an online space

requires greater awareness of our own emotions and reactions as well as more intentionality to attend to the other person and respond appropriately.

While there are certainly aspects of digital communication that make mutual understanding more difficult, there are also affordances that can help facilitate better communication practices. For one thing, the more distant, delayed nature of digital communication can be a huge advantage because it allows us time and space to wrestle with our emotions and to craft an appropriate response. An excellent rule of thumb for any type of digital communication that you find upsetting—whether it is an email, a text, or a social media post—is to walk away for a bit. (As noted in previous chapters, social media algorithms are [designed to be addictive and to spread content as quickly as possible](), which often ends up being emotionally charged, negative [dis]information [Cocchiarella].) Shut your laptop or put away your phone and give yourself some time to process. You might find that your initial reaction—perhaps rooted in fear, anger, or defensiveness (UC newsroom)—was an overreaction that would have escalated negative feelings and created further disconnect. Stepping away for a bit to calm down and assess your feelings can facilitate a more authentic, open response that will further the conversation.

Another benefit of digital communication is the ability to enrich communication using a variety of tools. Later in this unit, we will discuss multimodality and how various "modes" can significantly enhance the meaning of a message. In this context, a mode is a resource that helps you communicate meaning. It might be the way that you emphasize text using a bold font, capital letters, or different colors. Or it might be your ability to use hyperlinks to direct an audience to information that will provide important background, supporting evidence, or contextual information. Not only can we hyperlink to articles and studies, but we can link to videos and pictures to elaborate on an idea and clarify meaning. These are tools that can't necessarily replace the nuances of an in-person conversation, but they do create opportunities to provide

clarity and emphasis that go well beyond what an in-person conversation can do alone. A well-crafted digital message that strategically draws on these tools can go a long way to engage audiences and promote mutual understanding.

Obviously, communication is a complicated endeavor, and as long as there are humans involved with their different perspectives and experiences, there will always be the opportunity for misunderstandings and disagreements. However, good communicators consistently work toward mutual respect and shared understandings by thinking deeply about audience, fully listening to other people's thoughts and ideas, attending to the feelings and needs behind a message, and drawing on communication tools and processes that will bridge the communication gap.

Activity 8.2

Identify a recent misunderstanding that you experienced or witnessed. Describe the event and see if you can describe what the misunderstanding was about. In other words, what was the idea, issue, or event on which these two people didn't agree or understand in the same way?

Now take your analysis of the event a step further to see if you can identify the perspectives and feelings of each person involved. Why did they respond the way that they did? What are some past experiences these people might have had to shape their interpretation of the event? What are possible interests, values, or aspects of identity that would influence their understanding? Try to be fair and think deeply about the possibilities.

This type of thought process can help you step into another person's point of view, which is a good way to practice empathy. It can also help you think more deeply about your own perspectives (if you were part of the conversation) and consider where they come from and how they shape your reactions.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to say that all language is social?
2. In what way is language symbolic? Can you give examples of symbolic language other than spoken words?
3. How does the symbolic function of language allow for more complex thinking and communication?
4. How do we learn to encode and decode language?
5. In what way does language function as a mediator? What is the reciprocal relationship between thought patterns and language?
6. How can Burke's theory of identification through language be applied to online spaces?
7. What is a discourse community? Describe a discourse community that you belong to and the common language patterns that define that group. This might include terminology used as well as the content you focus on, the mode of communication, and the underlying purpose and values embedded in

the discourse.

8. What does it mean that language is a tool for social intervention? How can language be used to change attitudes and behaviors?

9. What is the difference between civil discourse and rhetorical listening? What are the benefits of each? How can each one be used effectively in online spaces to enhance communication?

10. What are the rhetorical advantages and disadvantages of digital spaces? What are some tools that digital communication can leverage to enhance the meaning of a message?

11. The book has identified in several places the way social media algorithms are designed to spread disinformation, spark emotional reactions, and promote people's addiction to social media. What is your reaction to this information? How can you protect yourself against these negative consequences?

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9. Rhetoric in the Digital Realm

Influencers have become increasingly prominent on social media channels, where they engage with thousands of followers and often receive a salary and other perks from companies that benefit from their popularity. The more followers they have, the [more money they make](#) (Nashville Film Institute), which means that many people have turned it into a full-time profession, and many more are *trying* to generate enough followers to do the same. But have you ever wondered what types of skills a successful influencer must have? Or, similarly, have you ever thought about why businesses of all shapes and sizes spend so much time and money thinking about the different ways they want to communicate with their audiences? A [content strategist](#), responsible for creating an organization's communication plan, is typically a core member of the leadership team for one simple reason: businesses need customers in order to survive, and the process of engaging and retaining customers requires very intentional, continual messaging across a number of different channels (Cione-Kroeschel).

You've probably realized by now that all of these skills relate back to rhetoric. The basic elements of the rhetorical situation—audience, message, speaker, purpose, exigence, and kairos—are foundational in all of our interactions, whether personal or professional, and considering some of the (dis)advantages of digital spaces that we discussed in the previous chapter, rhetorical skills are even more important online, in moments where the speaker and the audience are separated by time and space. As opposed to in-person conversations, where audiences are more likely (hopefully) to actively listen to a message and where the speaker can (sometimes) gauge the audience's reaction and make appropriate adjustments, digital spaces create unique challenges

that make it more difficult to get a message to "land," especially if the audience is fairly broad and loosely defined. It's harder to capture people's attention among the onslaught of ads and spam messaging that people receive each day. It's more difficult to cultivate trust and make genuine personal connections. And it's less likely that people will understand your meaning when you're not right there beside them to guide them in the right direction or answer questions.

These are just a few of the challenges that arise in digital communication, but the good news is that they aren't insurmountable. However, they do require a much deeper consideration of audience to identify the relevant needs, expectations, and values that would influence their interpretation and that should, therefore, guide the way that you craft a message. This chapter focuses on these key rhetorical considerations and thought processes that will facilitate more effective digital communication. While the chapter takes a more professional slant—considering aspects of branding and audience engagement that might align with a business's marketing strategy—the concepts presented here are also incredibly relevant to your own personal brand as well as your professional goals. Whether you aspire to be an influencer, a content writer, or something else entirely, the digital writing tools and strategies discussed here will significantly increase your success.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the important role of a content strategist in the overall success of an organization.
- Gain a deeper understanding of an organization's or

an individual's "brand" and why it's important to intentionally identify and cultivate a brand.
- Take a closer look at the importance of the audience in digital communication.
- Understand specific research strategies that are used to identify the target audience.
- Practice brainstorming processes that stem from audience research and that help inform effective content strategies.
- Understand the concept of digital orchestration and how specific types of messages on different channels work together to meet specific communication goals.
- Gain a deeper appreciation for rhetorical concepts and strategies that inform the use of more complex digital tools and communication strategies.

Branding

We've discussed the fact that all messages have a purpose—a response that the speaker hopes to elicit from the audience as a result of the message. It might be to get the audience to understand a concept, agree with a particular claim, click on a link to a website, purchase a product or service, reshare a post, subscribe to a channel, and so on. Often, there is more than one purpose behind a message. For instance, a company might send a promotional email to a list of subscribers with the primary purpose of getting the audience to purchase a product. But to do that, the email would also have to inform them about the product, convince them to click the

link to visit the website, and maybe persuade them to sign up for a free trial or contact a sales agent for more information.

A much more subtle, yet crucial, purpose behind most messages is to make a positive impression on the audience, and the collective sum of those messages and audience impressions reflects that person's or organization's brand. While the word "brand" could be used to refer to a company's "brand name," or the company that produces a particular product, it also refers to the way that the public perceives that company. [Jerry McLaughlin](), a *Forbes* contributor, explains it like this:

> Put simply, your "brand" is what your prospect thinks of when he or she hears your brand name. It's everything the public thinks it knows about your name brand offering—both factual (e.g. It comes in a robin's-egg-blue box), and emotional (e.g. It's romantic). Your brand name exists objectively; people can see it. It's fixed. But your brand exists only in someone's mind.

It's important to note here that brand is not the same as "mission." An organization's mission relates to what they are trying to achieve with the work they do—often related to meeting customer's needs with a particular product or service. It's the primary reason that the organization exists, and ideally, every task, both big and small across every department, would further its mission. While mission is about what a company hopes to *do*, brand is about who the company *is*. It's the perception that people have about that company's personality, values, integrity, customer care, expertise, and commitment to excellence. Obviously, a positive public perception in these areas would motivate higher levels of audience engagement, which has a direct effect on profit margins and a company's ability to achieve its mission.

Let's look at an example. In the last several Super Bowls, Budweiser has become known for its commercials featuring the friendship between a horse and a dog. A recent Budweiser commercial in the 2022 Super Bowl told the story of an injured horse and the emotional connection it had with a dog, which aided in its recovery. This is one in a long line of commercials since 2014 (with a commercial titled "Puppy Love") that trace the friendship between these two animals and create a strong emotional reaction in viewers. While the connection to the Budweiser product—beer—is nonexistent in these commercials, the real focus is on telling a story that viewers will associate with the Budweiser organization. The commercials highlight the hardworking, simple

American values of farm life, the strength and determination of the Clydesdale (which have been featured in Budweiser commercials since [1996](#), according to Sloan), and the friendship and intense loyalty between the animals—all qualities that Budweiser hopes that viewers will begin to associate with their company. Over the years, these heartwarming commercials have been immensely successful in not only engaging viewers but creating positive feelings toward the Budweiser name.

Obviously, expensive commercials with a large viewership are one way that a company can work toward developing its brand, but remember that a brand is the sum of all of the messaging and impressions that people have about a company. It relates to the content on its website, its social media posts, and the experience that customers have with a product or when they engage with customer service representatives. It also includes stories that are outside of the company's control—articles (positive or negative) that are published in the news as well as customer reviews on Yelp or on a company's Google Business Profile. In other words, everything that a company says and does should align with its intended brand, and companies that aren't intentional about consistently communicating their brand [suffer the consequences](#) (Dontigney).

Individuals also have a personal brand—the way that they want to be perceived by other people. Similar to corporate branding, this relates to your personality, your values, and your loyalty as a friend. It also relates to your professional niche—your work ethic, professionalism, and expertise in a specific field. Although the idea of a personal brand sometimes has a negative connotation, implying the idea that a person is fake and/or self-absorbed, people who have the most [success with personal branding](#) are authentic, highlighting the parts of themselves and their experiences that they want to be known for (Chan). They are also consistent, focusing on one key message or niche for which they want to be known, communicating often, and being faithful to that brand in all online and offline interactions.

As organizations and individuals set goals and take steps to

cultivate their online presence, branding is central to their ability to reach key stakeholders, make connections, develop trust, and prompt deeper levels of audience engagement. And at the heart of each message that creates positive impressions is a deep understanding of rhetorical concepts and strategies that make those connections possible.

Activity 9.1

Think of a company or a brand name that you are familiar with. Without looking up anything online, create a list of qualities that you believe define this company's brand. Now visit the company's website and social media pages. What kinds of content does this company publish? Be sure to read the About Us page, Mission Statement, and so on. Consider the implied meaning behind pictures and videos. Look at the tone of their written content. You might even look at customer reviews regarding their experience with the organization. Does this company's online messaging and customer feedback line up with the qualities you had listed? Are there any inconsistencies? Are there additional qualities that this company is striving to be known for that you didn't originally list?

Activity 9.2

Take a moment to consider your own personal brand. What qualities do you hope to be known for by family and friends? What do you want to be known for from a professional standpoint? Now review your most recent digital messages. Which ones line up with the qualities that you listed? Which ones don't? What type of content might you post (perhaps on LinkedIn or your own professional website) to demonstrate your interest, professional experience, and expertise in your desired field? Consider how you might carve out a specific "niche" within that field that would set you apart from others.

A Closer Look at Audience

Obviously, the audience is important to the success of a message. As we discussed in chapter 7, all rhetorical messages have an exigence—an imperfection or problem that prompts the speaker to communicate. In a rhetorical situation, only the audience can resolve the problem. The audience alone has the power—by adopting a certain perspective or taking a particular action—to fulfill the speaker's purpose, which is why a focus on audience is so important. A skillful communicator must consider who the audience is, what they already know about a given topic, what questions they will have, and what types of experiences and values they have that will influence the way that they respond to a message. As opposed to messaging that is writer-focused, emphasizing the speaker's point of view, a reader-centered approach is focused on audience (Long et al.). It forces the writer to step into the reader's point of view and to write a message in such a way that it anticipates

and responds to their questions, interests, objections, and values. It influences big-picture aspects of a message, such as content and organization, as well as smaller, sentence-level strategies, such as [word choice and tone](#) (Oaks).

As you might imagine, your conception of audience gets more complicated when you move to the digital realm. For one thing, you're not likely to be there with the audience as they read or watch a message, which means that you can't gauge their immediate reactions and follow up with clarifying information or respond to objections. Also, it's often much more difficult to identify who the audience is. Certainly, something like a text message or email is likely directed toward a person or a group of people that you know well, though you can't control who else—outside of your intended audience—might see that message. But other things like social media posts or content posted on a website are open to a much broader audience, made up of people with different interests, perspectives, and values. It's impossible to prioritize the perspective and to engage the attention of *everyone* who might stumble across the message, which is why digital writers often focus on the *target* audience—the ideal audience for whom a message is intended. For instance, a store that sells mostly baby clothes and other related merchandise like car seats and strollers would primarily target parents who either have or are soon expecting to have babies. Though other people might buy baby supplies for different reasons, the most likely customers would be young parents, and so the store's web content, social media posts, email blasts, and so on would be written with that audience in mind. Similarly, though all kinds of people purchase services from a nail salon, by far the most common customers are women, and as a nail salon thinks more about the type of woman that would be most likely to get their nails done—someone with at least some disposable income, perhaps someone who is busy at home and/or at work and is looking for a way to "pamper" herself—it becomes easier to craft persuasive messages that highlight services and experiences that these women would want.

This type of messaging that focuses on specific segment(s) of the broader audience is called target marketing because it focuses on target audiences—those people who are actually interested in the products and services that a business offers. Successful businesses might even [segment their target audience](#) in different ways, thereby creating smaller groups of people with specific qualities in common, which makes it possible to create different messages that would appeal to those different audiences (Coursera). For instance, most universities use segmentation in order to appeal to different types of people who might be interested in getting a degree. High school seniors are an obvious target, but increasingly, universities are also targeting high school juniors and sophomores, students from other universities who might want to transfer, and older adults looking to go back to school. They might also pay attention to the type of degree that a student is interested in so that they can communicate more specifically about relevant programs, job placement rates, and so on.

All of these strategies increase the likelihood of engaging individuals in the target audience. Also, because social media and internet browsing platforms use [algorithms that gather data](#) about individual browsing histories and online experiences (GCF Global), those people are more likely to encounter messaging that aligns with their interests and preferences, which in turn, makes it more likely that they will take action. For that reason, businesses are moving away from mass marketing strategies that cast a wide net across broad audiences. The more that they are able to clearly define target audiences and craft messages that will appeal to their needs, interests, and expectations, the more likely it is that their messages will reach the right people and have a positive effect. In the remainder of this section, we'll look at specific strategies that digital writers use to define and engage their target audience(s).
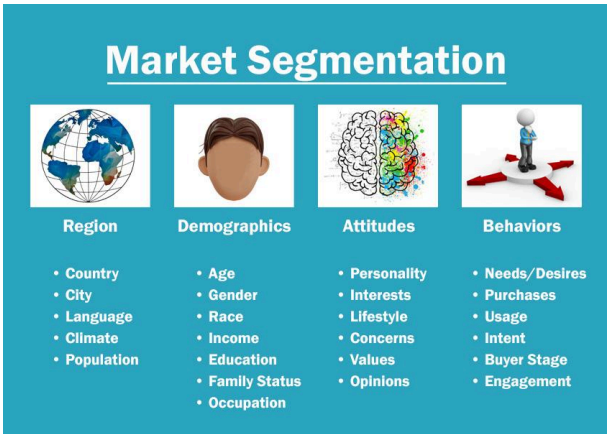
Audience Research

Research is the first, and arguably the most important, step in the process of clearly defining who the audience is and what their needs are. In fact, most businesses conduct [market research](#) as part of their business startup plan in order to guide product development and business strategy (Small Business Administration). However, the most successful businesses are the ones that *continuously* gather information about their key stakeholders in order to stay apprised of important trends, thought patterns, and experiences and then make appropriate adjustments to the product itself, customer service, promotional concepts, and communication strategies. In other words, audience research guides every aspect of an organization's daily operation. Without it, communication tends to be overly generalized, failing to capture anyone's attention, including people in the target audience. Another tendency is to assume that the audience is relatively monolithic and that they all share similar qualities and perspectives as we do. This is called the [false consensus effect](#) (Choi and Cha), and writers who fall into this trap

end up alienating important members of the audience and weakening the brand.

There are two broad categories of audience research—primary and secondary—with several different research methods within each category (USC Annenberg). The best approach depends largely on the type of information an organization is looking for as well as the available resources and potential limitations that either facilitate or discourage particular methods. What's more, these research strategies aren't mutually exclusive. Businesses regularly combine multiple research methods in order to deepen their understanding of the audience.

Often a good place to start is secondary research, which builds on the research that other people have done. This might include case studies that other organizations have conducted that provide in-depth information about a particular real-world situation—a specific problem or perhaps a person or a group of people. Though the specific details of a case study can't be generalized to apply to everyone, they often provide helpful ideas and solutions that can be applied to other situations. Another form of secondary research comes from surveys and studies published by organizations that specialize in market research. For instance, the Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the Pew Research Center, Gallup Poll, and YouGovAmerica are just a few examples of organizations that are constantly conducting research about different groups of people and posting their findings. While this type of information is probably too general for most organizations to apply directly to their target audience, it does identify interesting ideas and trends that might be useful to explore using primary research.

As opposed to secondary research coordinated and published by others, primary research is conducted firsthand by an organization and is specific to its own target audience. As you might imagine, this type of research is the most effective in helping an organization connect with its constituents and understand the needs, desires, and challenges that are most relevant to its business

offerings and communication strategies. The most common primary research include

- **Metrics.** One of the quickest ways to gauge audience sentiment is through digital [metrics](#) that paint a picture of users and their online experiences and decisions (Indeed Editorial Team). Some of the most common metrics include SEO (to determine the most common search terms and strategies that people use related to a particular concept), web traffic (to measure which pages are the most popular, which links people tend to click, how long people stay on a particular page, how many people "bounce" off a page that isn't relevant to their needs, etc.), traffic from other channels (to see how many people came to a website from other means, such as social media posts, text messaging, or email messaging), and brand awareness (to see how many people like, follow, share, comment on, or repost an organization's social media messaging). This is the type of analytics that many businesses conduct on a daily basis to gauge the effectiveness of their messaging and to make appropriate adjustments.
- **Surveys.** A survey is the most common form of audience research because it is a quick and cost-effective way to gather information directly from the target audience. Surveys also allow organizations to gather information from a larger segment of the target audience, which in turn provides more accurate results. Another advantage is that surveys can be designed with different [types of questions](#)—multiple choice, true/false, rating scale, matrix, and open-ended that allow respondents to use their own words to describe their experiences (SurveyMonkey). On the other hand, surveys require [careful planning](#) to ensure that they meet ethical standards, are easy to understand, motivate people to respond, and meet core research objectives (Mount Wachusett Community College). Another limitation of surveys is that it's difficult to gather in-depth information about people's

attitudes and experiences. For instance, a survey response might indicate that more than half of the respondents aren't interested in a particular product or service, but it doesn't provide deeper information about why that is or what strategies might be more useful to engage their interest.

- **Interviews.** As opposed to surveys that allow organizations to collect a little bit of information (mostly quantitative) about a lot of people, interviews provide much more in-depth information about people's experiences, thought processes, feelings, attitudes, and so on. Of course, it's important to select people from the target audience and to carefully craft open-ended questions that will lead to deeper insights. Interviews are also more time consuming. This includes not only the interview itself, but the time it takes to identify interview candidates, schedule the interviews, transcribe the interview recordings, and analyze the data. However, interviews are often worth the trouble because they provide so much [rich detail](#) about a person and their way of thinking, seeing, and valuing (Virginia Polytechnic Institute University Libraries). Interviews can transform "interview subjects" from the target audience into flesh-and-blood people whom an organization can understand and empathize with.

- **Focus groups.** Finally, focus groups are a great way to quickly get information from different types of people in the target audience. Like interviews, focus groups are designed around open-ended questions that relate directly to an organization's research goals, and they provide qualitative information and in-depth responses as well as the ability to follow up with more questions. However, the goal with a focus group is less about gaining rich detail about one person's experience and more about understanding thought patterns and behavioral trends among a group. It's therefore helpful to group people together based on traits that they have in common—gender, age, education level, and so on—and to have enough people present so that it's possible to distinguish group patterns from

individual quirks and anomalies.

Practice crafting survey or interview questions. To do this, you should first focus on a particular product, issue, or experience that you want to learn more about. For instance: Why do people enroll in a particular college or university? How do people prioritize vacation planning during the summer? What are some of the most significant financial challenges that people in your age group experience?

Identify a similar research question and then identify the type(s) of people who would provide the most helpful information. (For instance, if you want to know why people enroll in a particular college or university, you'd identify different types of students—from different age levels, majors, and so on—who are actively enrolled.) Next, craft several questions (8–10) that would help you explore this topic with people in your target audience. You'd probably include a few questions that collect demographic information about age, gender, and so on as well as more in-depth questions that relate directly to your research question.

To take this activity a step further, you might administer this survey or interview to see what kind of information you gather and to troubleshoot any weaknesses or gaps in your initial set of questions.

Audience Personas

In addition to audience research, businesses often create audience personas that "flesh" out the perspectives and experiences of individuals in the target audience (Thorp). While the specific characteristics of a persona are fictionalized—including the person's name, job title, family circumstances, hobbies, and so on—their core qualities are representative of real people in the target audience: their interests, values, challenges, demographics, and so on, all of which stems directly from the data collected from audience research. As noted above, surveys, interviews, and focus groups are all useful strategies for collecting information about the target audience, including their hobbies, professional goals, personalities, priorities, preferences, daily schedules, and pain points. All of this information is compiled and analyzed to identify audience patterns and insights, which are used to develop specific personas.

The purpose of these personas is to get the writer in touch with the target audience, to humanize their challenges and perspectives, and to craft messages that reach individual people on a deeper level. One of the key benefits of identifying the target audience is that it focuses on solving real problems. The idea isn't to trick as many people as possible into buying a product or engaging in an activity. The target audience is the segment of the population who, based on their interests and challenges, would actually benefit from a particular product, service, or activity. The personas help businesses and other organizations empathize with the audience and communicate effectively about the solutions they offer so that the people who would benefit most have the opportunity to engage (Worthy).

An effective audience persona answers several questions that help organizations get to know their audience. While there are different ways to craft a persona, Growth Business identifies six categories that can be used to identify relevant information about the target audience:

1. **Who are they?** This might include things like a job title and other responsibilities as parents, homeowners, children of aging parents, and other activities in the community. This category can be used to identify a person's daily schedule, their primary job responsibilities, and what they prioritize as they manage their time and make decisions throughout the day. Finally, you should use this category to identify demographic information about this person—age, race, socioeconomic status, gender, education level, and so on.

2. **Where are they?** This question can be taken several different ways. It might include where a person is geographically located. This is especially important for organizations that cater to people in specific locations. Understanding where a person lives and how a particular organization fits into that landscape can be extremely useful. This category could also include the online platforms where this person is most likely to receive information—social media platforms, websites, news sites, and so on. Based on a range of personal characteristics, people have different online habits. Identifying the digital spaces where someone in the target audience is likely to be is crucial to reaching them.

3. **What are their goals?** What does this person hope to accomplish, both personally and professionally? This might relate to career milestones, promotions, and activities. It might also include goals related to health, travel, relationships, parenting, lifestyle, and so on. Identify the primary things that motivate this person and how those goals propel their daily decisions and activities.

4. **Why are they struggling?** One key aspect of the target audience that most businesses seek to identify are the [pain points](#) that people in their target audience experience. These are the problems, frustrations, and desires that people experience that could be remedied by the product, service, or activity that a company has to offer (Shewan). These pain points are what motivate a person to seek some sort of

solution, making it more likely that they will respond positively to a message that aligns with their needs. Specific information in this category might identify problems related to physical pain, financial limitations, inconveniences and time constraints, and emotional frustrations. Pain points might also relate to obstacles that prevent this person from meeting the key personal and professional goals.

5. **How can you help?** Once you've fleshed out a person's goals and motivations as well as the pain points that they experience, you have the tools you need to catch their attention. The key is to think critically about how a particular product, service, or activity can help this person meet their goals or alleviate their pain points so that you can craft your message with a focus on these benefits.

6. **When is the best time to reach this person?** Remember the term "kairos" from chapter 7? Kairos is the most opportune time or circumstance for a message to reach a particular audience—when they are more likely to have the time and mental focus to pay attention to your message and respond positively. This category helps you think about when that might be. Based on this person's daily schedule and priorities, when are the ideal times to communicate your message to this person? What channels might be most appropriate based on their preferences and expectations?

Creating audience personas can certainly be a lot of work. Often, an organization will create multiple personas to represent different types of people in their target audience, which are used to craft different types of messaging. However, given the fact that most people see somewhere between 4,000 and 10,000 ads each day (Simpson), the only way to break through the clutter is to understand where and how to craft messages that resonate with your target audience.

Activity 9.4

Visit a website of a company or organization of your choosing. It could be a local company that provides a product or service. It could be a larger chain or global corporation. Or it could be a nonprofit organization like a church or a charity. Whatever organization you choose, you should review the website to get a clear understanding of what this company does and what types of products, services, and activities they offer.

Now consider what type of person might be in the target audience. What are their key values, priorities, and interests that would entice them to engage with this organization?

Buyer Journey

One final consideration related to the target audience is called the buyer journey, which is the mental process that a person goes through when they decide to engage with an organization and take action in some way—to buy a product or service or to take part in an activity (Sellers). Just because a product or service is available doesn't mean that people will automatically buy it. Especially in the digital age where people research company websites and customer reviews, people are more discerning than ever about how they spend their time and money. The buyer journey prioritizes the customer's perspective throughout this decision-making process, strategizing the various touchpoints that will engage their attention and provide the right information at the right time (Fontanella).

There are four stages in the buyer journey:

1. **Awareness.** In this stage, the buyer becomes aware of a challenge or desire that they want to address. This is the "pain point" that we discussed above, and it's what prompts an individual to find relevant information that will help them define and solve the problem. This is obviously a crucial moment for an organization to make customers aware of the solutions they have to offer—through advertising, social media

posts/shares, clear information on their website, customer reviews, and referrals from family and friends. The goal is for customers to not only know about a product or service but also begin to know and trust the organization, which makes it more likely that they will move to the next stage of the buyer journey.

2. **Consideration.** In this stage, customers have gathered the information they need to define the problem, they are committed to solving it in some way, and they are weighing the available options. Ideally, an organization's messaging in this stage helps distinguish it from competitors, helping potential customers understand the benefits of their product, answering any questions, and clarifying the next steps a customer should take. Once again, clear information on the website with prominent CTAs (calls to action) is crucial. Other touchpoints might include email or text messaging, blog articles, promotional ads, live chat, brochures and promotional videos, and so on.

3. **Decision.** In this stage, a customer has decided on the method that they want to use to solve their problem, and they are evaluating which company they want to engage with. They might be looking for instructional resources, information about return policies, customer reviews, or opportunities to sample the product.

4. **Repeat.** Ideally, customers are satisfied with the product or service that they receive, and they are motivated to continue to engage with a particular company. They might even tell others about the positive experience they had and recommend the product or service to others. Touchpoints in this stage might include thank you messages, promotional ads and emails, social media posts that people can "like" and reshare, and blog articles that keep people engaged.

Think about your own buyer journey with a particular organization and outline the different touchpoints that moved you from awareness to the point where you have become a repeat customer. How did you first learn about this company? What was the "pain point" that you hoped this organization might help you solve? What strategies did this organization use to engage interest and build trust?

Digital Orchestration

Understanding the audience is crucial to effective communication, but it's really only half of the challenge. Equally important is the message itself, which must not only reach the target audience but also catch their attention and compel them to take action. In fact, a lot of planning goes into an organization's content strategy to craft messages that strengthen its brand, consistently engage people at different stages of the buyer journey, and work toward larger missional and financial goals. This planning is called digital orchestration, implying that messaging must be coordinated across multiple channels to catch people's attention and direct their online path to a specific landing page where they are prompted to take action—to make a purchase, to provide contact information, to make a reservation, to give a donation, to create an account, and so on.

Websites

Typically, the foundation of an organization's digital orchestration is its website. Most communication efforts across other channels, such as social media, email marketing, text messaging, and even print materials, are focused on driving traffic to the website, where people can get to know more about the organization and what it has to offer. This is where people will go first—before they make a purchase, visit a store, or engage with the sales team in some way. They want to know what the costs are, how a program or service works, and what the benefits might be. Most likely they have specific questions that they expect to be answered, and if they can't quickly and easily find the information they are looking for, most people will bounce away from a website—usually within [less than 30 seconds](#) (Sims). However, if they do find what they are looking for and if they like what they see, they are more likely to stay and browse around, visiting different pages to see more about the background of a company, its mission, its community connections, and other types of products and services it offers—all things that help them move through the buyer journey as they get to know and trust the organization and take a step closer toward making a purchase. In other words, the goals of a website are multifaceted but also interconnected:

1. **To attract visitors in the target audience.** We'll talk more about SEO in the next section of the textbook, but for now, suffice it to say that the type of content that a website has plays a key role in helping that website rank higher in the search engine results page (SERP)—the list of websites that appear when you search for something in Google. Web developers and content writers are very intentional about the language that they use, the information that they provide, and the way they label key elements of a web page, all of which make it more likely that people who are interested in their

products and services will be able to find their website.

2. **Give relevant information.** Once an interested person finds the website, they should be able to quickly and easily find the information that they are looking for. Most of the strategies that go into creating an effective website focus on just this—a navigation map that makes sense, clear titles and headings, short blocks of text and bullet points that are easy to read, footers with contact information and social media links, hyperlinks that direct visitors to subpages with additional information. It's all about providing a positive user experience that helps people find the information they need and that makes it easy for them to take the next step—to get a quote, volunteer for an activity, make a purchase, visit the store in person, and so on.

3. **Develop the brand.** Of course, the website is also key in helping an organization develop its brand—to help people know more about its personality and missional goals and to help distinguish it from competitors. That's why websites aren't just text with chunks of information. They prominently feature the organization's logo and tagline; its mission statement; photos of the store, the friendly staff, and other customers enjoying their experience; any relevant certifications or credentials that demonstrate expertise; community partnerships and activities that might build emotional connections with the audience; an "About Us" page that focuses on personal stories; and so on. Even things that might seem more minor—the tone of the written content, color scheme, layout, and other design features of each page—are opportunities to make a positive impression on visitors and strengthen the brand.

4. **Prompt action.** The purpose of a website goes beyond giving information. The ultimate goal is to get people to respond in some way. While the ultimate goal might be to get potential customers to buy a product or service (or perhaps to participate in an activity or donate to a cause), often a website

will build toward that goal with smaller calls to action (CTAs)—to request more information, to follow the organization on social media, to sign up for a newsletter, to sign up for an account or a free trial. Even blog articles on a web page that give focused information related to an organization's niche will end with a call to action, prompting users to read other related articles or to contact a service representative for more information about a particular topic. These CTAs are always displayed prominently near the bottom of a web page, and they are a helpful way to guide people through the customer journey.

5. **Collect information.** An effective website also collects information about visitors and their online experiences, providing aggregate data about which links are the most popular, how long people stay on specific pages, how many new people visited the site in a given period of time, and so on. These metrics help marketing teams understand what type of information is effective in increasing traffic to the website and what types of adjustments need to be made. Many websites also collect information about individual users. Often they will prompt visitors to provide their contact information—maybe to receive the organization's weekly newsletter or to be entered into a drawing. Other times, websites use [cookies](#), which are "small text files" that are stored on a user's computer so that they can be identified the next time they visit the site (Nguyen and McNally). These individual data are used to provide more targeted information to specific users and to make it possible for organizations to reach out to people—through text messages or email campaigns—to update them about the latest blog post or promotional opportunity.

Blogs

The goal of most organizations' content strategy is to stay "top of mind" for people in their target audience. Of course, they want to reach potential customers who haven't yet heard of or engaged with their organization, but they also want to maintain connections with existing customers. That's what digital orchestration does. It continually develops messaging on a number of different platforms to drive people to the website again and again. Blogs (as well as other content like white papers and case studies) are a way of keeping information on a website "fresh" so an organization can advertise new content and increase traffic. While content on a website's landing pages might not change very often, posting a new blog article every week or two with interesting and useful information will give people a reason to come back to the site. Ideally, these articles help the audience in some way, guiding decisions and processes, but they also help an organization develop credibility, strengthen customer relationships, and drive traffic to other parts of the website.

As you probably already know, not all blogs are created equal. The blogs that are most successful in engaging people's interest and building a loyal audience have several key things in common:

- **They relate to the person's or organization's niche.** To really build credibility in a specific area, blogs should all relate to that area—demonstrating expert knowledge and providing unique information that adds value for readers. For instance, a plumber would focus their blog on plumbing-related topics—the best strategies to unclog a sink, affordable pipes that won't erode, building codes and best practices to install plumbing, new product reviews, water heater maintenance. The list goes on, and as this person continually adds more blog articles and gains readers, the more likely those people are to

hire or recommend this person for plumbing jobs. The key is to focus on useful content, not on self-promotion, which will quickly turn people away.

- **They utilize keywords.** Blogs are also optimized with meta descriptions and keywords so that they will rank higher when people search for that topic.
- **They include relevant pictures**, which make the article more visually appealing and can also aid in the reader's understanding of the content.
- **They have clear and engaging titles.** The point of a blog title is to pique readers' interest and let them know what they will learn from the article.
- **They make content manageable.** Subheadings, bullets, and short paragraphs all go a long way to making the content of a blog article manageable. If a reader sees a wall of text, they aren't very likely to read or follow along with the article. "Chunking" the content into smaller pieces makes it easier to process (University of Edinburgh). You can also make content manageable with simpler sentence structure and clear language that avoids jargon.
- **They provide hyperlinks.** Linking to other credible sources that support your article content builds your own credibility. Be sure it's a reputable news source or organization. Or it might be a study written by experts in a relevant field. Providing hyperlinks to supporting information shows that you've done your research, and it allows readers a path to get more information. Blogs might also have internal links that lead readers to other articles or landing pages on the same website.
- **They have clear calls to action.** Because blogs are largely marketing tools, they typically direct readers to take some sort of action at the very end of the article—to read more related articles, to contact a sales representative with questions about a specific product or service, or to visit the website's home page for more information.

Social Media

Social media is a critical part of an organization's digital orchestration. Like Mark Smith mentions in this *Forbes* [article](#), establishing a social media presence helps organizations connect with people where they already are, allowing them to reach more people while also strengthening their brand. Smith also mentions the ways that organizations increasingly use social media for customer service and as a direct path for users to buy products and services. Monitoring the various social media channels while creating new and meaningful content can be incredibly time consuming, which is why many companies hire a social media coordinator.

Ideally, an organization's social media content is planned out ahead of time. While they might post last-minute pictures of an event or responses to breaking news stories, most of the social media content is planned out on a social media calendar, usually put together a month in advance so that posts are consistent, engaging, and aligned with other communication efforts related to promotions events, or blog posts. To keep content fresh and interesting, a content writer might organize the calendar into different [content buckets](#) or categories, which helps to diversify content and build a company's brand (Huie). These buckets might include information about upcoming events and promotions, educational posts about a topic that is relevant to an organization's expertise (perhaps providing a teaser for the most recent blog post), human interest posts that help readers get to know the organization's staff as well as the activities that relate directly to the organization's mission, information about specific products and services, success stories, or customer testimonials and reviews. This type of content helps readers get to know and trust an organization in different ways. Also, since most social media posts will link back to the organization's website, it's a key strategy to increase audience engagement and ultimately increase sales.

A few strategies for successful social media posts include

- **Posting to social media platforms where your audience is likely to be.** It doesn't make sense to post to every social media channel. There are way too many, and you'd risk posting to channels that won't reach your target audience. For instance, some social media platforms are [more popular](#) than others (Dean). Similarly, people in different [demographic populations](#) use different platforms (Barnhart). For instance, female users are more likely to use Pinterest. Younger users are more likely to use Snapchat and TikTok.
- **Post information that is appropriate to the platform.** For instance, LinkedIn is focused on professional networking, so posts that are more personal or casual would seem out of place. Similarly, Instagram is typically used for high-resolution photos, while Pinterest is more about processes and how-to guides. Posting the right type of content on the [right platform](#) will help increase engagement (Accion Opportunity Fund).
- **Keep it short.** People won't read long posts. Be concise and get to the point quickly while also using language that is friendly and engaging.
- **Use hashtags to extend your reach**. [Hashtags](#) allow your post to show up in related groups and discussions so that people outside of your established followers can see and engage with your content (O'Brien).
- **Post engaging photos and videos that align with the text.** This will help your post stand out and increase audience engagement.

Email Campaigns and Text Messaging

Like social media posts, email campaigns and targeted text messages are used to advertise promotionals and updated website

content in hopes of increasing web traffic and sales. However, unlike social media posts, these messages are restricted to people who have opted in—often by checking a box (or failing to uncheck a box) during checkout that requests news and product updates or by filling out some sort of intake form with your name and contact information. You might recall that one of the secondary purposes of a website is to collect information about visitors. That information is used specifically to build mailing lists, often in a [content management system](#), so that an organization can easily distribute updates such as newsletters, announcements, sales campaigns, or teasers about a new blog article (Kinsta). Once again, the primary goal of these messages is to engage people who have expressed an interest in this type of information and to compel them to visit the website for more information. Unfortunately, many companies use deceptive tactics to build their mailing lists—enrolling people who don't wish to receive updates and filling their inboxes with spam. While this might grab some people's attention, it's more likely to get sent to a junk folder and to create a negative impression with people who end up getting annoyed by unwanted emails and texts.

Just like other forms of digital communication that work together to meet specific goals, there are some basic rules for text and email messages. We'll look at more specific genre conventions for different types of messages in a later chapter, but for now, the main guidelines include the following:

- Keep it short and to the point.
- Use language that is friendly and engaging.
- Use pictures and other graphics to grab people's attention.
- Use clear titles.
- Provide clear CTAs and relevant hyperlinks to guide the action that you want readers to take.

Digital orchestration is key to helping an organization create effective messages that strengthen its brand and that meet specific goals. While the specific content strategy is dependent on

the mission of an organization and the brand they want to create, one thing that remains constant across all digital media communication is a focus on audience and the rhetorical strategies that will foster connections and compel action. While effective digital writers must pay attention to specific marketing trends and learn to use a variety of digital tools, these strategies build from a fundamental understanding of rhetoric—reaching the right audience at the right time with a message that compels action.

Below is an example of digital orchestration by the Department of Homeland Security. You'll see a screenshot of the organization's website home page along with screenshots from Facebook and Instagram, each with posts that provide links back to the website. Also included is a screenshot of the website's footer, with icons that connect to all of the organization's various social media accounts. Users also have the option there at the bottom to subscribe to the email list, in which they would receive emails about the latest updates. The emails would also link back to the relevant pages on the website.

Department of Homeland Security webpage, by Department of Homeland Security ([CC0](#))

Department of Homeland Security footer, by Department of Homeland Security ([CC0](#))

Department of Homeland Security Facebook page, by Department of Homeland Security (CC0)

Department of Homeland Security Instagram page, by Department of Homeland Security (CC0)

For this activity, you will reverse engineer the content strategy of an existing organization. It could be the same organization that you selected in Activity 9.5 or a different one.

First, go to the organization's website and consider the existing content. How is the navigation of the website organized? How does the content on each page help meet key objectives? What CTAs exist to guide visitors through the site and persuade them to take specific actions?

Now look to see what other collateral messaging the organization uses to draw people to the website. Does it have a blog? A section for press releases or white papers? Which social media platforms does it use (often identified in the footer of the website)? Are you aware of other email or text messaging campaigns? Consider how different types of messages work together to meet larger communication goals.

Going Viral

Many people aspire to have their digital content go viral—to reach a large audience and gain notoriety from content that attracts more and more followers. But let's consider the downside for a moment. Setting out with the ultimate purpose of going viral can actually weaken your brand because the focus is on popularity and views

instead of things that are more important—authenticity, core mission, and deeper connections with the target audience. Lydia Sweatt for VidIQ says it like this:

It's hard to satisfy your audience and create viral videos simultaneously. One requires you to understand a specific group of people's likes, goals, and motivations. The other forces you to cast your net wider, so millions pay attention to your content.

But if you cater to millions, you cater to no one. You don't get to connect with a real community, so there's no shared interest to build off of. Plus, people can usually tell when you're in it for the views. You won't come across as genuine, inspiring, or relatable—qualities that put the "social" in social media.

In other words, it's better to focus on your main objectives and high-quality messaging that will engage people in the target audience, and then if a social media post does go viral, it will be for the right reasons, and it will be more likely to further your brand in a positive way.

Many organizations (and individuals) are increasingly using social media instead of traditional marketing and advertising, so finding strategies to reach a large audience is important. According to [Steve Olenski](#) writing for *Forbes*, going viral to "boost your brand presence and attract new customers quickly" isn't effortless, there are strategies that can increase your chances of success. Not surprisingly, the strategies listed in his article relate directly to rhetoric:

- Create quality content that the audience will find engaging and meaningful.
- Know your audience, which should inform your content strategy and increase your chances of them liking and sharing your posts.
- Leverage the existing popularity of influencers and popular social media accounts. Because they've already developed a

following, people are more likely to view content that they share or repost.

- Make personal connections with audiences through the stories you share. They should be "relatable" and authentic.
- Be concise.
- Engage users with interactive content that allows them to participate.

While going viral might in some ways be happenstance—snapping the right video or getting the right person to repost your content—effective messaging still boils down to an understanding of audience and the types of content that will capture their attention. The next chapter on multimodality provides more ideas on how to integrate design elements into a message to enhance meaning and audience engagement.

Discussion Questions

1. What is a content strategist? What role do they play in the overall success of an organization? What do you think are some of the key considerations of a successful content strategy?
2. How is brand different from mission? Why is it so important for businesses to cultivate a clear and consistent brand identity?
3. What does it mean for an individual to cultivate a brand? How can this be done in genuine and authentic ways—beyond simply trying to create a positive image?
4. What are some ways that a brand is developed?

What types of things do you think are most harmful to an organization's brand? Can you think of specific examples?

5. Why is an organization's conception of audience more complex in the digital realm? What are some strategies that organizations can use to help them better understand their target audience?

6. Many novice writers struggle to be reader-centered. Why do you think that is? How might this lack of awareness affect how the audience responds? How can writers cultivate a deeper understanding of their audience?

7. Why is targeted messaging to people in a target audience more effective than trying to create messages for a mass audience? What is your opinion of all of the data collection and user tracking that goes into creating targeted messages? Is it a help to users, or is it harmful?

8. What do you think are some of the main advantages and disadvantages of primary research as businesses seek to understand their audiences? How can secondary research be useful?

9. How is an audience persona similar to the second persona, discussed in chapter 5? How are they different? How do these characterizations enhance the effectiveness of a message?

10. What are different "touchpoints" that an organization might use throughout the different stages of the buyer journey to engage potential customers? How might the buyer journey coincide with an organization's branding? Can you give examples?

11.   Why is digital orchestration so important for an organization and its communication goals? How does this type of coordination coincide with an organization's conception of audience? What might be some of the consequences of poor digital orchestration?

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10. Multimodality

Did you know that in the early days of the internet, there weren't online videos or even pictures? Communication was [almost entirely text-based](), and even the text wasn't formatted like it is now in a variety of fonts, colors, sizes, and spacing options (Murphy). Can you imagine? You'd land on a web page and be confronted with a wall of text that you had to sift through in order to find the information that you were looking for. By today's standards, that would be considered a terrible website, and most people would quickly bounce off the page due to boredom or frustration.

Fortunately, the internet evolved rapidly to provide the capabilities for web pages to be thoughtfully designed, pulling together a variety of visual and even auditory elements that engage visitors and help them quickly and easily find the information that they need. In fact, digital communication is increasingly complex if you consider the types of "texts" that can be produced using video editing software, animation tools, live stream capabilities, and web applications that make it easy to incorporate a variety of media on a single web page without requiring HTML expertise. Understanding how to effectively combine these design elements to enhance the meaning of a message is not simply a nice skill to have; it's crucial to effective digital communication. In fact, composition courses are increasingly expanding instruction to go beyond text-based writing and include multimodal writing strategies that integrate visual and aural elements as well. This further develops literacy skills across multiple platforms and allows the writer to think more deeply and creatively about how to best convey information to the intended audience.

This chapter focuses on multimodality and the effects of layering different modes together in a single message. The term [multimodality]() literally means more than one "mode" or method to communicate meaning (University of Illinois Springfield). A message

often has words, for instance, and that is one mode. However, a written message will also include things like font choice, font size, font color, and other formatting effects, such as bold or italic font. These are also methods of communicating, and they have a significant effect on the way that someone reads and interprets the meaning of the words, which is why it's so important to consider your communication goals and how different modes—beyond word choice—can influence your effectiveness. In this chapter, we'll study the different modes that make up multimodality—linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and aural. We'll also talk about a range of tools within each mode as well as strategies for making a message cohesive, engaging, and easy for readers to understand.

Learning Objectives

- Know what multimodality is and what the different modes are.
- Be able to discern various examples of a particular mode.
- Understand how multimodality can enhance the meaning and persuasiveness of a message.
- Consider the creative possibilities for a given message and the ways that modes can be layered in countless ways to engage an audience and provide subtle nuances.
- Understand the rhetorical nature of multimodality and how modes can be used to target specific audiences for a particular purpose.
- Learn important rhetorical considerations that will guide your choices regarding multimodal messages.

Understanding the Different Modes

The point of multimodality is to combine elements that will *enhance* the effectiveness of a message with the intended audience, which means that you have to be thoughtful about the way that you put a message together. That's one important reason that this textbook includes a unit on rhetorical literacy in addition to practical literacy. Knowing *how* (the practical aspect of digital writing) is a different, more surface-level skill than knowing *why* or *to what effect* (the rhetorical aspect). For instance, most people know *how* to make text bold, create a bar graph, paste an image into a document, or even embed a video. Certainly, there are a wide range of platforms available that require a great deal of training and experimentation to understand *how* to do something specific. For instance, learning how to use iMovie or WordPress or Moovly and understanding the range of tools available would take some time and probably some additional instruction. However, just because you *can* do something doesn't mean that you *should.* (This is why we focus so heavily on critical and rhetorical literacy before diving into the functional aspect—to provide a framework that will guide your decisions.) There are hundreds of websites out there that do a terrible job of combining imagery and text and color—often trying to emphasize too many things with the end result that nothing stands out. Visitors are quickly overwhelmed or frustrated because it's difficult to find the information that they are looking for. On the other hand, websites and other types of messaging that fail to utilize various tools, focusing instead on large blocks of text, also fail to engage readers' attention or compel action. In other words, it's crucial to think about multimodality from an audience's perspective, combining elements in such a way as to capture readers' attention, help them understand key ideas, build a sense of trust and connectedness, and elicit a response that is consistent with your underlying communication goals.

Obviously, these objectives are more easily said than done.

As we've already discussed, in a digital era full of clickbait and pop-up advertising, it can be difficult just to capture a reader's attention, let alone to facilitate the deeper engagement required to read the entire message and respond to the call to action. However, being creative and intentional about how various modes are combined in a single message will significantly increase your chances of success. This section discusses all five modes, providing examples of each one and a deeper discussion of how it might be used effectively. Of course, each message provides an opportunity to be creative—to combine elements in different ways. There isn't one "right" way, but there are certainly some strategies that go against best practices. We'll talk about those as well.
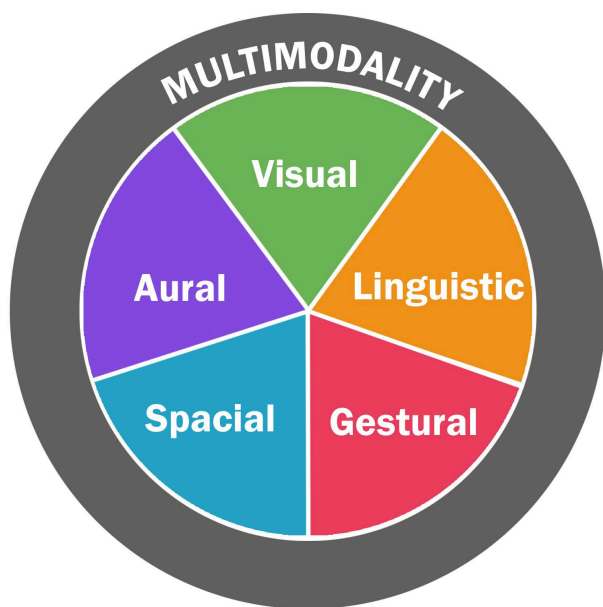
Multimodality, by Cara Miller [(CC BY)](#)

Linguistic

Let's start with the most obvious mode of communication—written

and spoken words. In chapter 8, we discussed the symbolic nature of words. They represent objects as well as more complex ideas, concepts, and processes. In our daily communication, these words are our primary tools to express our meaning to others—in conversation, in text messages, in emails, in letters, in blog posts, and so on. Within this category, there are [several elements] that can either clarify meaning or, if not done well, can create confusion (Fillmore):

- **Word choice.** As the [Writing Center] at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill points out, "Writing is a series of choices." Different words carry different connotations. For instance, calling someone "stubborn" has a more negative meaning, implying that the person is hard-headed and not easy to get along with. On the other hand, if you called that person "tenacious," suddenly those same qualities have a more positive connotation, implying determination and self-confidence. Additionally, in some cases, words and phrases can come across as vague to your audience so that they don't have the same depth of meaning as they might have with more precise wording. As a simple example, if you send a friend to the store with a shopping list with the word "vegetables" on it, who knows what you might get. That word can mean a lot of things. But if you write "carrots" or, more specifically, "baby carrots," you're much more likely to get the item you want because the wording is much more precise. You'd also be sure in specific situations to select vocabulary that matches your audience's understanding. Using big words and jargon that others might not understand or using vocabulary that is too simplistic or immature for a given audience can hinder communication as well as the ethos of the speaker. Word choice is significant in the way that others interpret meaning.
- **Grammar.** Grammar dictates the way that words are structured within sentences to create complete thoughts. We can't put words in just any order, especially when it comes to

more complex ideas and sentences. Following grammatical rules allows others to process information more easily, focusing more on the content of a message instead of the structure. Certainly, there are grammar rules that are more common and important than others. Subject-verb agreement and complete sentences are examples of grammar rules that help another person understand the meaning of a message. However, the rule that says you shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition isn't usually that important, especially in more informal contexts. Audience members will still understand the meaning and probably not think twice about the preposition. In other words, using effective grammar is contextual, depending on the audience, the occasion, and the method of communication. While verbal communication might naturally flow with starts and stops and incomplete sentences, some forms of written communication (especially emails or longer articles) tend to stick to the grammar rules. However, more informal messaging, such as text messaging or social media posts, breaks grammar rules intentionally to engage readers or communicate a specific tone. The same can be said of punctuation. While correct punctuation can be very effective and important in clarifying the meaning of written communication, occasionally rules are broken on purpose to *enhance* meaning. Importantly, though digital writing has expanded to include hashtags, emojis, and "texty" language, [correct grammar still matters](#) (Banner).

- **Sentence structure.** Sentence structure does relate to grammar and many of the considerations mentioned above. It's separated here because different types of sentences exist that are grammatically correct but that come across differently to audiences. You might already know that a lot of short, simple sentences create messages that seem choppy and disjointed, whereas long, complex sentences can be difficult to follow, especially when there are several strung together. Once again, the "right" sentence structure is somewhat contextual. For

younger audiences or for topics that are more complex or unfamiliar, it might be better to use shorter sentences (or even bulleted lists) to make it easier to understand. When you're writing a formal paper or communicating casually about general topics, it's more common to use a variety of sentence structures—both simple and complex—to create fluidity.

- **Organization of sentences and paragraphs.** Especially for longer messages, such as essays, articles, and speeches, the organization of information requires careful consideration so that one idea builds on the next in a way that is logical and easy for audiences to follow. For instance, the reason that academic essays have a thesis statement and topic sentences is that it makes the essay more cohesive and easier for readers to follow. They are given the main point in the thesis, and (hopefully) each topic sentence relates directly to that main idea. Similarly, blog articles might not have a formal "thesis," but they do still have an introduction and a sentence or two that gives the main idea, often called a [nut graph](#) (Bethune). They also have paragraphs, often grouped together under various headings that expand on that one main idea. Even in shorter or more informal communication, organization is key. An email, for instance, wouldn't start out with a list of bullet points. Readers would be confused right away. Instead, it would begin with a short introduction clarifying the subject of the email and contextualizing the purpose of the bulleted list.

While the linguistic mode is an important—often *the* most important—tool for communicating meaning, it doesn't stand alone. Other modes of communication are used alongside the linguistic mode to enhance meaning. What's more, the linguistic mode isn't always the most important. Consider, for example, the climactic scene of a movie. Would you understand that scene more fully—and be more emotionally connected—if someone else described that scene to you or if you watched it for yourself? Or maybe think about a class lecture that will last for a full hour. Would you find it easy to

pay attention and follow along with the topic if the instructor spoke in a monotone voice the whole time? Probably not. The tone and inflection in their voice paired with appropriate pauses, gestures, facial expressions, and maybe even a few visual aids with text and images would make that same lecture much more engaging and easy to understand. In the next few sections, we turn to other modes that go beyond linguistics to communicate meaning.

Visual

Another important communication method relates to the visual mode—the things that people see that help them interpret the meaning of a message. This can refer to simple visual cues as well as more complex images and videos. As mentioned above, these visual cues can greatly enhance a message to make it more engaging and readable. Here are some examples:

- **Font.** Beyond the meaning of the words in a written message, there are always visual elements to be interpreted. For instance, there is always a font choice, even if it's a very basic font like Arial or Times New Roman, it's a visual element that coincides with the linguistic mode, and it might suggest a message that is more academic or serious. There are countless font choices, and each one carries a certain "personality" that may or may not be appropriate for a given message. For instance, a script font like Edwardian is more formal and sophisticated, and it would be very appropriate for a wedding invitation. It wouldn't be as appropriate for an academic essay or the banner at a kid's birthday party. Something playful and fun like Curlz might be better suited for a birthday party, but it would send the wrong message on a funeral bulletin or a political ad. In addition to font choice, there are other font strategies that you might use to emphasize parts of a message:

larger font, bold, italics, underlined words. These visual font elements demonstrate the importance of certain words or ideas when used appropriately. Similarly, larger bold font can be used for headings in a blog post or essay to help readers follow the larger structure of a text and easily find main ideas.

- **Formatting.** Another subtle visual cue relates to the formatting of a message. The simple act of breaking up a large block of text into separate paragraphs—with a space between text blocks and/or a tab at the beginning of a new idea—is extremely helpful in making a text more readable and easier to follow. Formatting also refers to things like line spacing (i.e., leading), alignment, the horizontal spacing between letters (i.e., kerning), line breaks, inset text, and hanging indents. These are pretty basic formatting cues that we tend to take for granted because they seem so obvious, but when they are ignored, a message becomes much harder to read. An article that is right aligned, for instance, is harder to read and would likely frustrate readers. On the other hand, when you are intentional in your choices—even formatting choices that go against standard conventions—it can grab readers' attention and complement a message. An ad with right-aligned text, for instance, might be very helpful in balancing the elements on a page or in creating a sense of unbalance or tension with the audience.

- **Color.** Not only are colors effective in catching people's attention and enhancing the aesthetic of a message, but they are often used in symbolic ways to evoke certain emotions or moods (Incredible Art Department). Black and white or sepia, for instance, are sometimes used to evoke a sense of nostalgia or timelessness. Bright, vibrant colors can imply energy and positivity. What's more, color can be used strategically to draw the audience's attention to a particular text or part of an image. In S*chindler's List*, for instance, the film is in black and white except for the red coat that one of the Jewish girls is wearing, which forces audiences to pay attention to that one

object and consider the significance. In a similar way, color can be used in text-based documents to draw readers' attention to headings or titles. Similarly, readers generally know that blue, underlined text contains a hyperlink that they can click on for more information. Finally, colors are also strategically used by organizations as a branding tool. They select a color palette that corresponds with their logo, and then they integrate those colors into their website and other marketing materials as a subtle way to reinforce their image.

- **Images.** Pictures and other graphics can significantly enhance a message. If a friend tells you about a trip that they took to the Grand Canyon, you'd probably understand their story based on the descriptions that they use, but it would be much easier and more effective to show you pictures from the trip so that you can see the rocks and canyons for yourself. Similarly, instruction manuals often come with pictures of the various parts so that you can better visualize how the pieces go together. Once more, the use of imagery in a message has several purposes. It helps audiences understand a particular scene or idea or process, but it also engages their attention and can be effective in evoking an emotional response. A good example is the [SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) commercial](#) with Sarah McLachlan. It blends several modes together, including sound (the song), text on the screen, and imagery to evoke feelings of sympathy and compassion in the audience. All of these elements work together to meet that purpose, but an important element in that commercial is the imagery—the pictures of animals in cages, some of them who have clearly been abused—that evokes the strongest reaction. This pathos appeal using imagery isn't always about sympathy. An amusement park will use photos of people having fun on rides. A hotel will feature photos of clean, luxurious rooms and swimming pools. The purpose is to create a sense of desire in the viewer, who feels compelled to participate.
- **Videos and GIFs.** Like still photos, videos, GIFs, and animations

have a variety of purposes. They can be extremely helpful in conveying information. How many times have you gone to YouTube to find a video that provides a step-by-step demonstration of how to do something? Particularly when paired with verbal descriptions and instructions, a video provides richer details of an event or a process. Consider, for instance, football games on television that provide instant replays, zooming in on particular areas and using slow motion to carefully examine the details of a play. That video, along with the commentators' discussion and telestration capabilities, helps viewers understand exactly what happened. Also like still photos, videos are extremely effective in engaging an audience. Consider how popular YouTube and TikTok videos are in capturing viewers' attention. They also can be used to create emotional connections—perhaps even more so than still photos—because they depict detailed scenes and allow viewers to hear people's voices and other sounds, providing the sense that they are right there in the moment (Slice).

- **Charts and graphs.** In many instances, a bar graph, pie chart, or some sort of illustration can go a long way to clarify an idea or process. Particularly when it comes to numerical data, a graph or chart with colored lines is much easier for viewers to process than verbal or written text filled with a string of numbers. The same is true of tables, flow charts, figures, and illustrations. Audiences are much more likely to make sense of data when they are organized in a visual format like this.

Gestural

Like the name implies, the gestural mode allows meaning to be interpreted based on the speaker's gestures—body movements and facial expressions. This is an aspect of communication that is missing in written text and phone conversations. You don't get to

see the physical gestures of the person speaking, which give you a much clearer sense of that person's attitude toward the subject as well as their implied meaning. In many instances, the gestures and facial expressions are crucial in helping you understand the meaning of a message. Consider, for instance, sign language, in which the entirety of a person's message is encoded using physical signs. Similarly, the game of charades is based on our ability to communicate through body language and signals. In other instances, physical cues might not embody the entire message, but they can help you interpret another person's mood and even gauge how your own message might (or might not) resonate with them. This mode might include the following:

- **Hand gestures.** Simple cues like pointing a person in the right direction or giving a thumbs-up to let someone know that you are OK can go a long way in communicating information. Scuba divers, for instance, have a series of hand gestures that they use to communicate with each other underwater. In that case, the thumbs-up signal means that the person needs to go to the surface, whereas a flat hand across the throat signifies that the person is out of air—an incredibly important message that they would need their partner to understand. Hand gestures are also used in sign language to communicate a variety of ideas. In fact, just like written language, [sign language has its own grammar](), and it can vary significantly from one region to the next (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders).

- **Facial expressions.** Another important gestural cue—whether in an online conversation, in a video, or in person—is facial expression. Sometimes a person's face says it all in terms of their attitude or mood. It can communicate information to others. A wink, for instance, might signal that a comment should be taken as a joke. A raised eyebrow might indicate surprise or suspicion. At the same time, it's probably important to keep in mind that facial expressions can be—and often

are—misread (Cimons). Someone's frown might be misunderstood for anger or sadness when they are really just daydreaming or concentrating. Another thing to consider is the effect that facial expressions can have on other people, often evoking similar emotions and facial expressions in the audience (Dimberg et al.).

- **Body language.** Body language can also be a form of communication. Your posture, stance, proximity to other people, and other body movements are all signals to other people about your attitude, feelings, and reactions. Think about the perspective of a teacher, standing in front of a classroom full of students. Maybe there are several students right up front, taking notes, raising their hands with questions, nodding along to the lesson. These are clear signals about the students' attitudes toward the teacher and the class. So too are the signals of students who are sitting at the very back of the classroom, arms folded across their chests, eyes fixed on their phones. This distinction might not seem important, but consider how much easier it is to communicate openly with someone who seems to be receptive to your message and has a positive attitude toward you versus someone who doesn't. In many instances, your body language will be the first thing that makes an impression on other people, and it can go a long way to build your image in a positive way—or not.

Spatial

The fourth mode is spatial, related to the spacing and overall layout of a document and the connections this implies to readers. Even the most basic black text on a white document has an arrangement that influences the order in which readers take in information, and as other elements are placed on the page, that placement determines

the way that readers understand the message. The primary elements included in the spatial mode are the following:

- **Arrangement.** In some instances, the arrangement of elements on a page might be obvious. The title of a document should go at the top. Different sections or chapters in a longer document are usually separated by space to show the separation. In other instances, it might not be so clear, especially as more elements are added. When pictures or charts accompany the text, for instance, what's the most appropriate placement so that the visual elements effectively complement the text? What about a large web page that includes several different sections of text, photos, banner graphics, social media icons, and maybe even a video or two? The choices that you make to arrange these items on the page can aid in the viewers' ability to easily find and process information, or it can make it much more difficult. Of course, there are several [design options](#) to choose from (Babich), depending on the purpose of the website and the types of elements that you have to work with. Further, many websites are "responsive," meaning that the layout shifts for mobile users so that the information is still easy to read on a smaller screen.
- **Proximity.** In addition to the arrangements of objects and design elements on a page, proximity also influences the way that readers interpret a message. It's probably obvious that elements that go together should be close to each other. A caption that goes along with a photo, for instance, is usually directly underneath that photo. Similarly, groups of similar things tend to be grouped together. For example, items in a list, perhaps across the top of a website as a navigation menu or in bullets within the text, will likely be close together to signify that they go together. In contrast, additional white space can be used to separate items that don't go together, to signify a transition or distinction.
- **Contrast.** Using contrasting elements can be an extremely

effective way of drawing a viewer's attention to a particular focal point, perhaps through opposing colors, sizes, shapes, textures, or even white space. While this might seem like a simple task, knowing how and when to create contrast can be tricky. The main idea is to use contrast effectively to set elements apart or to highlight key takeaways while still maintaining an overall aesthetic that is pleasing to the eye and consistent (see repetition below).

- **Repetition.** Repetition refers to the use of the same element over and over in a composition. For instance, most designs have a specific color palette, often using two to five colors that work well together and can be used in certain instances to create contrast. However, the composition sticks to these basic colors to create a sense of uniformity. If too many colors are used, then it creates a sense of chaos, and nothing is emphasized effectively. The same principle applies to other elements like shapes and textures. Importantly, this type of repetition is often seen across a family of publications by the same organization, which helps to establish branding and familiarity with the audience.

Aural

The final mode is aural, referring to the many different sounds that can bring meaning to a message. We'll talk in the next section about the fact that all messages are multimodal, including verbal messages. There are the actual words (linguistic) and then a range of other aural cues that allow the audience to interpret the meaning of the words more fully:

- **Volume.** For one thing, the volume with which someone speaks can significantly impact the way the message is interpreted. A louder volume implies a sense of urgency and importance,

suggesting that the words demand your immediate attention. Similarly, if someone is yelling, it's obvious that they are excited in some way, perhaps angry, scared, or happy. On the other hand, someone speaking in a low whisper might be sharing something personal or secretive, which might also influence the way that you react to the information.

- **Tone.** A person's tone is also important. Most of us are familiar with sarcasm, in which a person really means the *opposite* of what they say. If someone says, "Well, that's fantastic" in a sarcastic tone, you know that they aren't really very happy. In the same way, a person's tone of voice can tell you a lot about their attitude toward the information—if they are joking, excited, somber, or serious.
- **Pitch.** As the pitch of our voice goes up and down, certain ideas within our sentences are emphasized in a way that gives meaning to our words. According to the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing](), "Pitch refers to how high or low a speaker's voice is….Each person has the capability to intentionally change their pitch across a range large enough to engage an audience." The chapter goes on to discuss the ways pitch can be used to emphasize certain ideas, communicate emotion, or signal to the audience that a transition is coming.
- **Rhythm.** In poetry and in music, rhythm is the speed at which a speaker moves through the text, and as you probably know, it can be extremely effective in engaging an audience, who find themselves moving to the beat. It's the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates rhythm. A faster rhythm is more energetic and tends to be happier, whereas a slower rhythm is often more sad, soothing, or sentimental. Not only can rhythm evoke an emotional response in an audience, but it can also be used to emphasize certain words and ideas, especially when the pattern is disrupted.
- **Music.** Have you noticed that the climactic scene of most movies has a song playing in the background? It might be an upbeat song as the good guy triumphs over evil, or it might be

a slower, crescendoing song that matches the intensity of feeling as two lovers reunite. Similarly, the SPCA commercial with Sarah McLachlan is so emotionally moving partly because of the song "Angel" that plays while pictures of dogs and cats are displayed, which reinforces the feelings of sadness a viewer feels and further compels them to take action. You probably already know that music can have a significant effect on a [person's mood and emotional reactions](#) (Heshmat). Upbeat music can energize and spark a more positive mood while a slower song can spark feelings of sadness or nostalgia. That's why pairing an appropriate song to fit an occasion or the underlying purpose of a message can have such a powerful effect.

- **Sound effects.** Many digital tools used for editing videos or even putting together a slideshow come with standard sound effects and allow you to upload others that you created on your own or purchased somewhere else. While some sound effects might be a bit hokey (think of the "bing," "bang," "pow," "boing" that a lot of kids' cartoons include to draw a laugh), they can also be used in other ways to intensify a scene and sway the emotional reaction of the audience. A simple example are the laugh tracks that used to accompany popular sitcoms, signaling to viewers that a scene was meant to be funny and compelling them to join in. Movies and plays also use sound effects—train whistles, footsteps, door slams, gunshots—to add clarity to a scene and further engage the audience into the plot.

- **Pauses.** Sometimes just as powerful as the words and sound effects are the pauses in dialogue and other sounds. Consider the long silence that might follow the sound of a gunshot and all of the thoughts and emotions that might occur during that pause. Strategic pauses can also be used during a conversation or a speech to engage attention. A pause automatically builds suspense as the audience waits to see what the speaker might say or do next.

Find an example of an online video, ad, or website that utilizes a number of modes. Review the content and come up with a list of all of the multimodal elements that are used. This includes not just the mode (e.g., visual) but also the specific tool (e.g., photo or color).

After you've created your list, consider how these elements work together in this message. How do the multimodal tools help engage the audience or clarify the meaning of the message? What kinds of feelings or emotions might they invoke that work toward a particular purpose?

Keep in mind that not all messages are effective. It might be that the message you selected is ineffective in some way, maybe because some of the tools seem to contradict the larger meaning of the text or because there are too many elements vying for the audience's attention. Perhaps there aren't enough modes utilized to the fullest potential, and the message comes across as boring or vague. Consider how multimodal tools might have been used more effectively.

The Power of Multimodality

All messaging is inherently multimodal, requiring audiences to pay attention to multiple features in order to gain a clear understanding

of the speaker's intention. For example, text-based messages include not only the linguistic mode but also visual elements related to font, color, and formatting. Similarly, verbal messages (over the phone, for instance) also include the linguistic mode along with aural elements, such as volume, pitch, tone, and meaningful pauses. Even a simple wave from a friend accompanies other visual elements like the speed of the gesture and the context of their surroundings. In other words, the categories provided above can be a helpful framework, but it's also a bit deceiving, as a single message will automatically span across different modes, bringing with it a variety of subtle nuances. It's also important to point out that multimodality isn't limited to the digital realm, which is a common misconception. Hopefully it's clear by now that in-person conversations as well as printed materials are also multimodal.

Given the importance of multimodal communication, it's no wonder that most people prefer to have important conversations in person. With a range of linguistic, audiovisual, and gestural cues, it becomes [easier and quicker for an audience to interpret the meaning](#) of a message more fully because there are more cues present (Drijvers and Holler). It's also easier for a conversation to flow more naturally because visual and gestural cues help signal when one person's turn is over and another person's begins. Certainly, there are digital tools that make it possible to have synchronous conversations with other people using a range of audiovisual cues. Zoom and Google Meet, for instance, simulate face-to-face conversions so that we get a better sense of the communicator's meaning through facial expressions and gestures. Screen sharing features make it possible to show pictures, text, and videos while on a video call, which further expands the range of modes available. However, there are still some [significant limitations](#) to video conferencing, including the fact that participants aren't in a shared space, they can't fully see each other, and there are often problems with sound or video quality that can significantly interfere with the conversation (Karl et al.). The minor lag that occurs in video conferencing makes it more difficult to read the other person's

signals, which disrupts the normal flow of a conversation. What's more, following the COVID-19 pandemic, many people complained of [Zoom fatigue](#), related to the fact that their facial expressions seemed to be under constant focus, and they have to rely more on exaggerated gestures to get their meaning across (Drijvers and Holler).

However, while all messages automatically rely on a range of modes to create meaning, the benefit of understanding multimodality is that you can be intentional about the ways that you combine modes to engage audiences, clarify meaning, and compel action. This is particularly true given the range of digital tools that allow you to quickly and easily edit a video, create voice overs, and add music or snippets of text to a video or animation. More than ever before, professional tools are available to the masses to plan, create, edit, and disseminate multimodal messages, but what sets apart an effective message from one that gets "swiped" could be the way that multimodal elements are layered to create one coherent message that works toward a clear purpose.

Multimodality as a Rhetorical Tool

The best way to think about multimodality is with a focus on rhetoric—the intended audience for a particular message and the underlying purpose(s) of that message. What is it that you hope an audience will do or think as a result of your message? What tools are available in a given situation—whether in person or online—and which ones would be most effective in enhancing your message or might be a distraction or deterrence? As you've probably already figured out, combining modes into a single, coherent message requires quite a bit of strategy, focusing on the audience's expectations and predicting their questions and reactions. Layering as many modes on top of one another as possible isn't a strategy. It would overwhelm an audience and make it difficult for them to

attend to all of the different signals available. [Pflaeging and Stöckl](#) call this "multimodal rhetoric," defined as "functions and structures realized by and constructed in the strategic conjunction of several semiotic modes, which ultimately carry rhetorical action."

While there aren't any set rules on how to combine multimodal elements to create an effective message, there are some important rhetorical considerations:

- **Who is the audience?** What type of modes will be most effective in engaging their attention and helping them understand the message? It's also important to consider what particular element will be most effective. For instance, you might decide that a photo is appropriate for this audience, but not just any photo will engage their interest and persuade them to act. Considering the target audience and your message, you'd have to determine what type of picture will resonate with their experiences, values, and perspectives.
- **What are the genre conventions?** Each genre has its own set of standards that align with the audience's expectations. A TikTok viewer, for instance, is expecting a short video while someone on Instagram is likely to expect vivid and interesting photos.
- **What modes align most with your goals?** For more complex content that might be harder for an audience to understand, pairing spoken words with bulleted text, charts, and other images can help them understand the information. If the main goal is persuasion, think about the types of content—whether it's a well-developed argument or a photo or a bar graph (or maybe all three)—that will be the most compelling.
- **How can you leverage various modes to invoke different appeals?** Do you remember the different rhetorical appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos? As you integrate different types of content using various modes, you can strengthen the persuasive effect of your message in powerful ways. Depending on the content, the genre, and the audience, one type of appeal

might be more appropriate than another. What's more, different modes work better with certain types of appeals. For instance, written and spoken words often work well with logos appeals while images and music are often more effective as pathos appeals.

- **Which modes are readily available on the platform you are using?** Sometimes the affordances and constraints of a particular application will dictate some of the choices you will make.
- **What type of resources do you have available?** Do you have high-resolution photos or quality footage that would be effective? Do you have the means to obtain or create these media? Obviously, you can only work with what you have, and it's always better to use high-quality, original materials than stock photos or something low-quality.

The main idea is to think creatively and about how different modes might be combined to convey a message, to persuade your target audience, and to compel action. Truly effective digital communication utilizes a variety of communication tools, requiring a deeper understanding of the rhetorical situation and the most appropriate means of persuasion.

Activity 10.2

For each of the following scenarios, consider the best method of communication (in-person, text, email, social media post, etc.) and why. What modes are available to you in a given method that would allow you to communicate more clearly and effectively?

- You missed an important assignment in one of your classes, and you want to talk to the professor about how you can make up for that assignment.
- You want to invite some of your friends to your birthday party, which is at a location they might not be familiar with.
- You need more information about how to put together the new entertainment center you ordered.
- You just got back from an amazing vacation in the Bahamas, and you want to encourage others to do something similar.

Discussion Questions

1. What is multimodality, and why is it an important consideration when it comes to in-person or virtual communication?
2. What are the five modes of communication? How are these categories limited in terms of the multimodal nature of communication? Can you give examples?
3. How can the different modes be used to build an emotional connection with the audience? Give at least one example.
4. For each mode, give at least one example tool (or strategy). Explain how that specific tool can be used to convey meaning. How might it be paired with

other tools—either within that same mode or in another mode—to reinforce a message?

5.   What is multimodal rhetoric? What are some rhetorical considerations that would help you make effective choices when crafting a message?

6.   Why is the audience so important when you're considering your choices for a multimodal text? What types of things might you consider?

7.   How can the various modes be used to develop rhetorical appeals? Give some examples from the chapter as well as some of your own.

8.   In what ways has digital communication enhanced the opportunity to create multimodal text?

9.   Do you think digital communication can in some circumstances be more effective than in-person communication? Why or why not? In what ways is in-person communication limited in terms of the modes that are available? How is digital communication limited?

10.   Why do you think people tend to conflate multimodality with digital communication?

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11. Rhetoric and the Ideological Turn

Think about your favorite story. It might be a movie or a novel or even a memoir. Now think about the main things that you like about this story. It might be the plot twists or the underlying premise of the story that engages your imagination. Most likely, if it's your favorite story, you have some sort of connection with the protagonist—the main character of the story, whose internal thoughts and feelings are revealed as the plot unfolds and with whom the audience is invited to identify. When that main character experiences loss or when obstacles emerge that prevent our "hero" from reaching their goals, we feel their pain and anger. As the climactic moment approaches, we feel anxiety as we hope for the best but worry about defeat. And as is the case for many narratives, we rejoice with the main character at the end when, against all odds, they experience success.

One of the most important, yet difficult, aspects of a good story is characterization, referring to the level to which a character's personality, motivations, feelings, and perspectives are revealed. A well-developed character creates an emotional connection with the reader, who begins to empathize with the character's struggle and invests time and emotional energy into their story. Even the villain of an engaging story can be developed in such a way that the audience begins to understand and even sympathize with their situation. They become more than the greed, arrogance, or cruelty that might have characterized them at first. On the other hand, a flat character can ruin a story because they don't come across as genuine. Instead of fleshing out that character's complex experiences, emotions, and motives, the story focuses on a singular aspect of the character, leaving the audience

with very little understanding or concern about what happens to them.

Unfortunately, the digital realm has a terrible way of flattening people so that all we focus on is a singular aspect of their identity, whether it's their political affiliation or their stance on a particular issue. Alongside political tensions that have increased significantly since the pandemic, ranging from mask mandates to vaccines to race relations to sexual identity, some people are very quick to attack anyone who opposes their viewpoint, condemning them for being selfish, greedy, racist, overly sensitive, or intentionally divisive (Jørgensen et al.). This is especially true in online spaces where tensions quickly escalate with a series of posts designed to cut the other side down. Seldom do people listen to try to understand the full complexity of another person's perspective—the experiences, emotions, and motives that inform their position on a topic. Rarely do people consider the larger ideologies, assumptions, and social contexts that inform their own position. We tend to assume that we are in the "right," and that the other person, through their own ignorance and immorality, is clearly wrong.

Many people argue that our democracy has lost its ability to discuss important issues in a rational and productive way. Henry Giroux argues that as digital media emerged with an emphasis on target marketing, individualism, and algorithms that insulate users into an echo chamber of similar views, we've lost our focus on public values and relationships necessary for a healthy democracy. He says, "Instead of public spheres that promote dialogue, debate, and arguments with supporting evidence, we have entertainment spheres that infantilize almost everything they touch, while offering opinions that utterly disregard reason, truth, and civility" (10). Similarly, James Klumpp and Thomas Hollihan point to our "current moment" as an especially critical time to refocus on "democratic values" and the intellectual practice of analyzing public discourse to understand the rhetorical strategies and ideologies that influence our moral development and our behaviors. In fact, more than 30

years ago (1989), Klumpp and Hollihan wrote their landmark essay "Rhetorical Criticism as Moral Action," arguing that rhetorical critics must look beyond the persuasiveness of a message; they must also interrogate the moral implications—the effect that a message has on the experiences and opportunities of real people. In their 2020 follow-up to that article titled "Rhetorical Criticism and Moral Action Revisited," Hollihan and Klumpp reiterate the importance of their original argument in the context of increasing political turmoil:

> The current moment prompts us to pause to evaluate how well academic critics are honoring democratic values and promoting a democratic culture. Democratic values, particularly comity and broad participation, have been under assault for the past several years in the United States and many of the same threats are undermining democracies around the world. Among the central values requiring attention and defense in our democracy are, in fact, values which shape our rhetorical interactions with our fellow citizens. The moral and rhetorical imperatives we pointed to 30 years ago have merged in ways beyond a theory of criticism; today's moral crisis fully implicates the rhetorical. (334)

This chapter endeavors to make explicit connections between public discourse, rhetorical strategies of persuasion, and ideologies that demonstrate our values and inform our actions. It emphasizes *both* critical and rhetorical literacy. In fact, language and ideology are deeply intertwined, constantly revealing our values, our beliefs about what is "true," and the way that we define ourselves in relation to other people (Berlin). Understanding this connection and doing the intellectual work of analyzing the rhetorical strategies and ideologies embedded in public discourse equips us to be more discerning about the information that we like, share, repost, hyperlink, and ultimately accept as fact. It puts us on the defensive against misinformation and disinformation as well as the underlying motives to manipulate our emotions and destroy

our sense of reality. It allows us to examine our own messaging and the ideologies that are embedded therein. And it creates a habit of careful analysis and reasoned engagement that helps us move toward "vibrant public spheres and a political culture that invites deliberation, discussion, debate, and dissent" (Hollihan and Klumpp, "Rhetorical Criticism and Moral Action Revisited" 335).

Learning Objectives

- Understand the connection between rhetoric and ideology.
- Learn how to analyze rhetorical discourse for the ideologies embedded within.
- Be able to identify rhetorical strategies that are used to create emotional reactions in an audience and create division against an opposition.
- Learn about Burke's theory of identification and how it can be both a positive communication tool as well as a tactic of manipulation.
- Consider the way that ideology in language links to motives and compels people to behave in particular ways.
- Understand the shifts in rhetorical analysis as a result of the Ideological Turn and how these shifts are still relevant today.
- Consider the effect of digital media on people's ideologies and their ways of engaging with controversial issues.
- Be able to identify the logic of an augment based on its premises.

- • Understand the principle of a logical fallacy and be able to identify weak and illogical arguments.
- • Consider how Burke's theory of the "comic corrective" can be applied to your own way of framing specific issues.

Rhetoric and Ideology

In order to make the connections between rhetoric and ideology, some review might be in order. Remember that rhetoric is about effective communication, and often our communication goals center on persuasion—compelling the audience to react in a certain way. It's about prompting specific thoughts and behaviors. However, not all persuasion is explicit. There isn't always a call to action at the end of a message. Not all persuasion centers around a central claim in which the speaker outlines clear and specific reasons. When we think about the ways that ideologies are embedded in our language, the focus tends to be on the subtle nuances and the beliefs that are *implied*. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ideology as "a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture." These are the foundational beliefs we have about the world—what we hold to be "true" or "right" or "normal." These beliefs are implied in our communication with others, and often we *assume* that others do or should share the same beliefs. We tacitly, perhaps even unconsciously, impel the audience to adopt these same beliefs.

For instance, a couple that has been dating for a while will often have different family members and friends ask, "When are you two getting married?" It's a simple question that isn't an explicit

argument, but it does imply that the couple should be thinking about getting married. There are also some assumptions embedded in this question—that marriage is a good thing, that finding a partner and getting married should be a priority. Culturally, there are also a lot of assumptions built into what "marriage" means—that it's typically between man and a woman, that most married couples have children, that married couples eventually buy a home and conform to established gender roles. Of course, not all romantic relationships are this way, particularly in the last few decades as ideologies have begun to shift, but couples who resist the more conventional system of marriage are still met with questions and well-meaning concern because their relationship doesn't conform to what seems "normal."

You can probably see how different ideologies can create discord. The current political landscape, with so much tension and debate surrounding numerous issues, has a lot of people worn out. They're tired of rehashing the same arguments about the same issues and confronting the emotional tensions that coincide with such conversations. They might say things like "I don't want to discuss anything political" or "Why does everything have to be so political?" These statements signal their fatigue over the underlying political agendas (and ideologies) and our tendency to reduce complex problems to a matter of Republican versus Democrat. However, on a much deeper level, everything is political, not in the sense of right versus left but in the sense of demonstrating our beliefs, values, interests, and identities, which connect us to certain groups of people. In his book *Politics for Social Workers*, Stephen Pimpare devotes an entire chapter to the reality that "everything is political." He says,

> Politics is the way that we make people aware of problems, introduce ideas into the public sphere, create frameworks for thinking about issues and their relative importance, structure debates about policy, frame defenses of justice and fairness and equity, and build consensus for change. (49)

Pimpare goes on to explain that politics has a fundamental effect on the quality of our lives and our communities and that even when we do retreat from political debate, there are still political implications of reinforcing the status quo.

Similarly, our language, even when we veer away from hot-button political topics, is inherently connected with our ideology—our conception of how the world is and how it should be. At the height of the "Ideological Turn" in rhetoric, when scholars like Philip Wander and James Berlin argued that everything is political and there is no way to avoid ideology even in the most "neutral" spaces like a classroom, Berlin argued that our language is never value-free: "Conceived from the perspective of rhetoric, ideology provides the language to define the subject (the self), other subjects, the material world, and the relation of all of these to each other. Ideology is thus inscribed in language practices, entering all features of our experience" (Berlin 479). In other words, all of our communication points toward our values, beliefs, relationships, and identities—what we hold to be "true," "right," and "normal." If we are considering the ideologies embedded in a message, we'd look beyond the immediate benefits to the speaker, also considering what types of ideas and what types of people are valued.

Let's look at another example. Within the last several years, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of mental health has become more prominent and more normalized as people are increasingly aware of the importance of this issue. Whereas the idea of seeing a therapist used to be highly stigmatized, signaling that someone was "crazy" or somehow inadequate, it has become much more commonplace for people to openly discuss their mental health needs and personal strategies. Much like going to a physician for an annual checkup is considered to be a normal, beneficial practice, having a counselor and implementing mental health strategies has become a more "normal" aspect of personal wellness. This means that when someone states that they are overwhelmed by a project and need more time to have it completed or that they are taking a "mental health" day, they are invoking a larger set of

values and cultural shifts. They are asserting the value of their own mental health, but they are also tapping into bigger conversations and historical contexts about the importance of mental health in general, and they want their audience to respond in ways that confirm that value and promote further awareness and sensitivity. The ideology is embedded in the way that the speaker implies the reality that mental health (along with the *person* with the mental health needs) should be prioritized. However, someone who responds that these issues are in a person's head or that they are being overly "sensitive" or "fragile" is invoking a different set of values, *de-emphasizing* the importance or the reality of mental health challenges.

Though this is just one possible example, it demonstrates an interesting dichotomy that characterizes much of our everyday speech patterns—an "us" versus "them," a "right" versus "wrong," and a "real" versus "imagined" way of framing a topic and our own position, selected from a range of possible perspectives. We are more likely to be persuaded and to persuade others when issues are framed from the perspective of an in-group versus an out-group, compelling audiences to identify with and make choices that validate their belonging to the in-group. In his book A *Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke calls this phenomenon "identification" and "consubstantiation." Though we are all separate individuals, we use language to mark our identity as part of select groups (i.e., discourse communities) with common interests, values, and goals (i.e., areas in which we are "consubstantial"). Consider, for instance, a sports team, which is its own discourse community imbued with unique communication patterns. Members of the team share a common goal of advancing their skills and having a successful season, and to that end, much of their conversation is *about* game strategy. This discourse community is defined not only by the topic of conversation but also the specialized terms that are used and the genres where communication happens—that is, team huddles, locker room speeches, group chats, and so on. Going back to our discussion about ideology, if we were to take a closer look at these

discussions, we'd certainly discover some underlying values and assumptions of what is right or beneficial— perhaps teamwork, physical fitness, or competition. And according to Burke's theory of identification, each individual on the team demonstrates their belonging through a series of rhetorical choices, such as their participation in the team huddles and their use of the accepted jargon. It even includes the sports gear and apparel they wear. They conform to the established communication patterns in order to persuade others that they are "normal," that they are part of the group. And it is that sense of belonging and common interest that increases their likelihood of adopting specific perspectives and behaviors that align with the in-group.

It's not difficult to see how language can be used to create solidarity with an in-group that is "right" in its view of "reality," purposely set up against an out-group, whose complex experiences, perspectives, and beliefs are oversimplified and dismissed. Burke originally considered his theory of identification as a positive phenomenon that would create empathy and mutual understanding for perspectives different from our own. He said, "Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (A *Rhetoric of Motives* 22). However, he also warned that identification could be twisted, used as a weapon to create division. His "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" (from the book *The Philosophy of Literary Form*) provides a rhetorical analysis of how Hitler used identification—the "us" versus "them" framework—to create solidarity among the Nazis and dehumanize the Jewish population. In a similar way, Thomas Hollihan and James Klumpp, in both their 1889 and their 2020 essays, analyze the rhetorical discourse of authority figures to show how identification is a persuasive tactic that invites the audience to be on the "right" side of an issue by establishing common values and perspectives, pitted against a common enemy.

While language is often an intentional mechanism used to further an agenda and reinforce particular ideologies, it's important

to point out that ideology exists in our language, even if we don't have a particular agenda in mind. Our selection of words and topics that merit discussion and our way of framing those issues will always imply a set of values and beliefs. Consider, for instance, our previous discussion about Philip Wander and the second and third personas implied in a message. There is the ideal audience who is pushed to the center, whose beliefs and perspectives are valued as "normal" or idea. The third persona is the group in the audience who is pushed to the periphery, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the speaker because they don't share particular qualities, perspectives, or abilities. For instance, the song "Stand by Your Man" begins with the following lyrics: "Sometimes it's hard to be a woman, givin' all your love to just one man." The message is clearly geared toward women, but it makes some assumptions about what it means to be a woman (second persona)—someone who is devoted to a man. However, if we consider the third persona—members of the target audience who are marginalized or ignored by the message—we'd see that there are lots of women who don't fit this ideal because they aren't (and possibly don't want to be) in a relationship with a man. Chances are the song wasn't intended to alienate these members of the audience. Nevertheless, like all language, it promotes a certain perspective about what is true or normal.

Similarly, the way that we respond to the ideology in a message tends to be automatic and deeply ingrained, reflecting our own core beliefs that we are often unwilling to question or reexamine. As opposed to forming a logical response, we fall back on identifications and familiar ways of thinking and seeing. According to Stephen Pimpare, this is even more true the older that we get:

> By the time we are adults, we have constructed a robust set of positions and beliefs. When thinking about the political world, we begin with those beliefs, those inherent biases, and then work backward (often unconsciously) to fit whatever facts we are being presented with into that preexisting schema. Our minds use this motivated

reasoning to protect us from cognitive dissonance—information that could unsettle our established beliefs or worldview. As a consequence, our brains literally process information differently depending on whether it fits with or challenges a preexisting belief.…This helps explain why presenting people with evidence showing that they are incorrect about something can make them *less* likely to change their minds—they double down on their position, adopting a defensive crouch. (146)

The point is that our language is steeped in ideology, sometimes in subtle but nevertheless powerful ways. As we'll discuss in the next section, language does more than reflect reality. Rhetoric is so important because of its ability to shape reality, to frame a topic in particular ways that change how an audience understands an issue and affect the choices they make. It has tangible consequences in the world.

Activity 11.1

Using Burke's theory of identification, consider the different ways that you signal your belonging to different groups. This might be as simple as the type of clothing that you wear to different events or the way that you position yourself in a room of people. It might also include activities that you're a part of, images or logos that you display on your car or walls, and words and phrases that you use in various contexts.

Choose an online text that advances a particular viewpoint or perspective. It doesn't have to be an explicit argument, nor does it have to be long. It could be a video, social media post, blog article, or speech. Read and annotate this text with identification in mind. Some questions to consider include the following:

- Who is the intended audience?
- What seems to be the purpose(s) of this text?
- What are some things that the audience is invited to identify? It might be a perspective, a common goal or problem, or an interest, belief, or value. Underline specific sentences where this occurs.
- If applicable, what are ways that other people—outside the in-group—are portrayed? Underline specific words and phrases and consider their effect on the audience.
- How successful is the text in persuading the audience?

Rhetoric and Moral Action

A common misconception is that words don't matter, that they are nothing more than air. Kids on the playground like to say, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Teenagers and even adults when confronted by dialogue they don't

like will shrug and say, "Whatever," to show they aren't affected at all by what was just said. But the whole purpose of this unit on rhetoric is to show that words *do* matter. Through the power of language, ideas take shape, personal connections form, perspectives change, emotions swell, and people take action. Ideologies inform policies, legislation, legal proceedings, codes of conduct, and individual behaviors—all things that have tangible effects on people's lives. As discussed above, Hollihan and Klumpp wrote two essays focusing on the moral consequences of rhetoric, arguing that rhetorical criticism is about more than unpacking the underlying purpose and rhetorical strategies utilized to persuade an audience but that it should also consider the ethical implications of the message: How moral are the underlying motives of a message? How will it affect audiences in positive or negative ways? What actions does it compel, and how do those actions affect different groups of people?

> Morally engaged critics owe our democracy attention to the multiple forces at work in discursive practices that mislead the public, limit their ability to act in their own best interests, transform their disagreements into hostile uncooperative factions, and reallocate political, economic, and social power from the ordinary citizens to increasingly wealthy elites. Such citizen critics, when fervently but soundly engaged, seek to bend the curve of history in a new direction in which aroused public and resilient institutions regain democratic sensitivities and reclaim democratic civic virtues. (Hollihan and Klumpp, "Rhetorical Criticism as Moral Action Revisited" 334)

In their original 1989 essay, Klumpp and Hollihan discussed three shifts in rhetorical criticism that put the focus more squarely on the moral consequences of rhetoric, and these ideas are still incredibly relevant today. This first shift relates to our understanding of rhetoric as being situated in a cultural and historical context. An individual speaker has a purpose and a unique way of persuading an audience, but their words are always part of a larger "social milieu" that significantly enhances the meaning

of their words and the effect on the audience. "The question of 'Who is the author?' is thus answered with attention to the forms of the culture from which the speaker draws, or the speaker becomes interesting as an authority who speaks *for* society even as s/he speaks *to* society; thus the shift to rhetor as socially grounded" (88; emphasis original). In other words, a speaker presents ideas and perspectives to an audience, but they also use language that is inscribed with cultural significance, carrying a socially agreed upon set of values and emotional responses. Michael Calvin McGee coined the term "ideograph" to refer to words and phrases that are imbued with meaning to generate particular responses from an audience. They connect to larger ideologies and can be used in rather vague and abstract ways to induce a reaction from an audience. For instance, the word "equality" is an ideograph, deeply embedded in historical events and cultural values, and when used as part of a message—even when its meaning in that specific context is ill-defined—it tends to automatically garner attention and support. In summary, the first shift in rhetorical criticism examines the moral consequences of a message by considering the larger cultural and historical significance of the message and the way key words and phrases are used to invoke particular reactions.

The second shift identified by Klumpp and Hollihan pertained to the power of rhetoric to create meaning, informing the way that people perceive a topic or event. Instead of seeing rhetorical discourse as a reflection of meaning that has already taken place as part of an event, scholars began to see the power of rhetoric to create meaning through selections (and deselections) of details and word choice. It shapes our way of seeing and knowing about the world, our sense of reality about how things are and how they should be. According to this view, "rhetoric transform[s] material contexts into social order" (Klumpp and Hollihan, "Rhetorical Criticism as Moral Action" 89). It doesn't reflect a fixed reality; it creates a sense of what is "real" or "true."

The third shift in rhetorical criticism put more focus on the motive of the speaker—their intended outcome regarding the

way that the audience perceives and responds to reality. You'll recall from chapter 7 in this textbook that all rhetoric is grounded in an exigence—an imperfection or problem that the speaker hopes to remedy as a result of rhetorical discourse. In that view of rhetoric, only the audience—through their response to the message—can resolve the exigence. Rhetoric compels action, and it's through this intended action that the ideology and ethical implications of a message can be evaluated.

The point in all three of these shifts is that rhetoric has a significant impact on the lived experiences and material reality of people in the world. Ideology has a direct influence on our views of right and wrong, shaping everything from parenting strategies to university admission standards to hiring practices to school curriculum to legal proceedings. And because language is the vehicle through which ideologies are established, language is the place where we begin to examine social values and the material consequences of rhetoric.

The Effect of Digital Media

Much has changed since the Ideological Turn of the 1980s, largely as a result of the prevalence of digital media as the primary means through which people receive information. It used to be that people received most of their news from newspapers, which had more information and were organized as an inverted pyramid with the most important information near the beginning, which made it easier for readers to process information (Xenos et al. 709). What's more, the format of the newspaper allowed readers to take in information at their own pace, perhaps going a bit slower and rereading important information. The fact that it took more mental energy meant that readers concentrated more and typically processed information on a much deeper level than they would have from a television news story (Xenos et al. 709).

As you probably guessed, as digital media emerged and grew in popularity, newspaper readership diminished. According to recent statistics from the [Pew Research Center](#), the circulation of U.S. daily newspapers was 55.7 million in 2000 and has decreased dramatically in the last two decades, down to 24.3 million in 2020. In contrast, [68% of Americans](#) report that they get their daily news from social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, X, and Reddit (Shearer and Matsa). This number is especially high considering that so many survey respondents in Shearer and Matsa's study admit that they believe much of the information they get on social media is "inaccurate," but they continue to use it for news information because of the "convenience."

In addition to the misinformation that is so prevalent online, disinformation and misinformation permeate digital media, intended to produce division and distraction. Market segmentation and algorithms create an echo chamber effect that prevents users from accessing the full spectrum of perspectives on key issues, creating a false sense of "reality." All of these distortions and cognitive shortcuts further entrench people in preset biases and beliefs and make them more resistant to anything outside of their own point of view. As Giroux argues, "Numbed into a moral and political coma, large segments of the American public and media have not only renounced the political obligation to question authority but also the moral obligation to care for the fate and the well-being of others" (14). Positive engagement in today's digital realm requires users to proactively step outside of their perspective, purposely seek out alternative voices, and engage thoughtfully with rhetorical discourse to understand the underlying ideologies and social consequences.

Logical Fallacies

The discussion regarding language, ideology, and underlying

agendas points to an important skill that will help you discern the logic of an argument without getting swept away in language that is designed to distract and deceive: the ability to identify logical fallacies. We've talked at length about rhetorical strategies (pathos, ethos, logos) and rhetorical devices that are intended to persuade an audience. In many instances, these are sound strategies that present evidence and help audiences connect emotionally with a specific point of view. However, many arguments aren't sound. Whether intentionally or not, they present a line of reasoning that isn't logical. Sometimes, there's no "reasoning" at all. Instead, the rhetor uses emotionally charged words, hoping to evoke an emotional response. These are called logical fallacies, which the Purdue OWL defines as "illegitimate arguments or irrelevant points...often identified because they lack evidence to support a claim."

We could spend an entire textbook discussing argumentation and logic. For now, suffice it to say that a sound argument is one that employs logical reasoning. It draws a conclusion (the position or claim) based on evidence and/or principles that are laid out for the audience to demonstrate that they are true and that they logically lead to the conclusion. In the case of inductive reasoning, specific events or examples are used to draw a general conclusion (Miller and Poston). For example, if you fail an exam every time that you cram the night before, you'd probably eventually conclude that cramming for a test doesn't work, and you'd find a different way to study. In contrast, deductive reasoning (Miller and Poston) begins with a general idea or principle (often called a major premise) and applies it to specific circumstances (the minor premise) in order to draw conclusions. For example:

- Major premise: All birds lay eggs.
- Minor premise: A parakeet is a bird.
- Conclusion: Parakeets lay eggs.

Of course, arguments about social and moral issues can get a lot more complicated than that. However, once someone gives a reason that supports their position on an issue, then it's easier to examine the premises that led to their conclusion. For instance, if one of your professors says, "I don't accept extra credit because it undermines student learning," then you can examine the major and minor premises that led to that conclusion to discuss if they are really true and if they inevitably lead to the conclusion:

Major premise: Anything that undermines student learning in a classroom is bad. (Most people would probably agree that this is true given that the primary purpose of a class is learning, though some people might have different ideas about how important a particular class really is and what "learning" looks like.)

Minor premise: Extra credit is an example of something that undermines student learning in a classroom. (This is especially open for debate. Some people might argue that it depends on the activity that leads to extra credit. Some extra credit assignments aren't very challenging or meaningful, but some can do quite a bit to engage students with course material and further their understanding of particular concepts.)

Conclusion: Extra credit in the classroom is bad.

You can see how examining the premises that lead to a conclusion can be really useful in deciding whether they are true and whether they are valid (i.e., they logically lead to the conclusion). Premises are also helpful in examining the underlying values of an argument. This argument about extra credit is obviously valuing the importance of student learning and the integrity of the grading system. That doesn't mean that this teacher *doesn't* value students' mental health or retention rates, but it does imply that when considering their policy regarding extra credit, they are prioritizing student learning. The reasoning behind an argument will help you uncover the beliefs and values implied in that position,

which makes it possible for you to analyze the implied ideologies and your own position on the issue.

A logical fallacy is so named because there is an error in logic. The premises either aren't stated or they don't logically lead to the conclusion. There are too many fallacies to name here, but many resources exist that give a more [exhaustive list of the fallacies](#) (LogicalFallacies.org). For now, let's focus on a few that are fairly common, especially in heated discussions intended to shut down the opposition instead of engaging meaningfully with the issue.

- **Hasty generalization.** This is especially common with inductive arguments that are built from specific examples. A hasty generalization comes to a general conclusion based on insufficient evidence—sometimes from just one or two examples. If, for instance, you talk to three women and they all say that they love cooking, it would be a hasty generalization to therefore assume that *all* women love cooking. It's easy to see how this could lead to stereotyping and prejudice.
- **Ad hominem.** This Latin term refers to arguments that attack a person instead of refuting an idea or position. These arguments often resort to name-calling or statements that attack a person's character, thereby ignoring the issue at hand and the premises that led to a specific conclusion. Many political ads resort to this type of fallacy. They assert that the opposing candidate is lazy, underhanded, or in some way unfit for office, which is a way of sidestepping deeper discussions about key legislative or fiscal issues.
- **Straw man.** This type of argument misrepresents the opposition in some way, often by making their reasoning look weak or immoral. The speaker can then easily "refute" this false account of the opposing view instead of engaging with their stronger reasons. For instance, if someone opposes a tax referendum that would increase teacher pay, it would be a straw man fallacy to say that the person hates teachers or doesn't care about education.

- **Bandwagon.** The arguer claims that a particular position is the "right" one simply because it's the most popular. Saying that we should get rid of speed limit laws because nobody follows the speed limit is an example of a bandwagon fallacy.
- **Post hoc** (also called false cause or causal fallacy). In this instance, an arguer assumes that since one event happened before another, the first event *caused* the second event. There might be a *correlation* between the two things (often occurring together based on a range of complex factors), or they might not be related to each other at all. A valid argument must demonstrate how one thing causes another. For instance, if you had Fruit Loops for breakfast and then got an A on an important test, it would be a post hoc fallacy to say that the Fruit Loops *caused* you to ace the test. Certainly, it might have helped that you had breakfast (a correlation), but other factors like how well you studied, how well you slept, and how much you were able to focus during the exam would also have to be taken into account.
- **Appeal to pity.** This type of argument attempts to persuade an audience based on making them feel sympathy or pity. Using your puppy-dog eyes to convince a friend or family member to lend you money is an appeal to pity.
- **Appeal to authority.** This fallacy claims that a position is the right one because an "expert" on the subject agrees. However, in this case, the person's expertise is not relevant to the issue at hand, or it's exaggerated. Having a celebrity or public figure endorse a brand of detergent is an example. While this person is popular and may have expertise on certain subjects, they aren't an expert on detergent and aren't qualified to make a credible claim.
- **Circular argument** (also called "begging the question"). The term refers to the fact that an argument makes the same (or a similar) statement for both the premise and the conclusion. In other words, the argument doesn't develop clear reasons; it simply restates the conclusion in different ways. For instance,

saying that we shouldn't enforce the death penalty because it's wrong to put a criminal to death is a circular argument. The reason and the premise are saying the same thing, and there isn't any explanation about why the death penalty is wrong.

- **False dilemma.** In this situation, the arguer makes it seem like there are only two possible options or positions for a particular problem or issue, ignoring that there are other—often more reasonable—alternatives. For instance, to say that you can only afford a new car if you get a second job would be a false dilemma because it ignores all of the other financing options.
- **Slippery slope.** This type of argument is based on cause and effect, identifying a highly improbable sequence of events that will unfold following a specific decision or starting point. It has the "snowball effect" of making a problem seem really big and potentially out of control if we make the wrong decision. It would be a slippery slope if you say that you can't miss one homework assignment because it will lead to more and more missed assignments and failed tests, causing you to eventually fail out of school and end up homeless on the street.
- **Equivocation.** An equivocation uses vague language to confuse listeners, to make the other side look guilty, or to avoid telling the truth about a topic or event. For instance, if you said you had a healthy lunch because you had a salad, your audience might feel deceived if they later discovered you had a taco "salad."
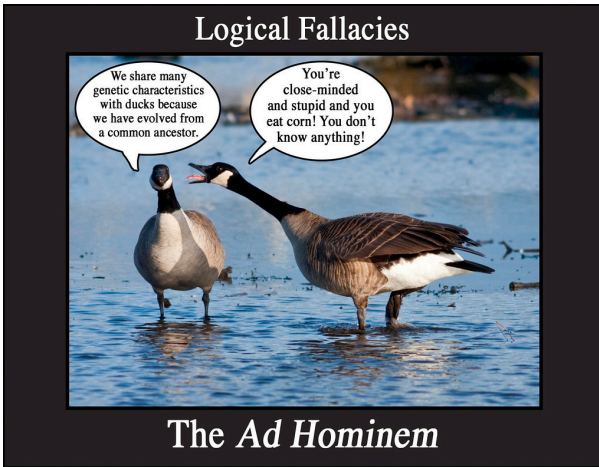
The list goes on. Probably many of these seem pretty familiar, reflecting the types of statements you've seen people make in social media posts, interviews, or even political debates. For our purposes, it's not that important that you memorize the entire list of fallacies. What's more important is that you recognize an argument (especially if it's your own) that isn't logical, that relies on these strategies to trick or manipulate the audience in some way, or that lays out illogical premises that don't match the conclusion. While these fallacies might seem obvious, people are often vulnerable to logical fallacies when the argument aligns with their cognitive biases—their preconceptions and tendencies to oversimplify complex situations and ideas. Because of their own ideologies, they take shortcuts when presented with information that confirms their own assumptions, which means they don't take the time to examine the logic behind certain arguments. That's why logical fallacies are often effective, even though they might seem so obvious.

Review the information about inductive and deductive argumentation. Practice writing your own inductive argument, beginning with a set of examples and building toward a conclusion, as well as a deductive argument that lays out general premises to make a statement about a specific situation.

You should also practice deconstructing an argument statement, which is a statement that gives both a claim and a reason. It can be a statement that you make up or that you find online. See if you can use that statement to construct the major and minor premises that led to that claim and then evaluate whether or not you agree that the premises are true and that they automatically lead to the conclusion.

This YouTube video has examples of logical fallacies from various television shows and commercials (Brown). It names each type of fallacy before showing the clip with the example. Review the clip and then see if you can explain the

fallacy in each example. In other words, what makes a particular clip a slippery slope or an ad hominem?

Alternatively, you can find your own clips or make up your own examples of logical fallacies and take turns with other students to see if you can guess which logical fallacy they are using.

Raising Your Awareness

The point of this chapter is to help you raise your level of consciousness when it comes to the ideologies that are embedded in the language that we use every day and to be equipped to logically and rationally engage in discussions with people about right versus wrong. On one hand, this is an internal exercise that first and foremost should challenge you to examine your own values and beliefs, how those ideologies are communicated through language, and what the consequences are as you interact with other people who listen and respond to your words. At the heart of rhetorical analysis and our discussion of rhetoric as moral action is a focus on people. Certainly, that means understanding your own perspectives and experiences and how that has led to specific opinions, viewpoints, and behaviors, but it also means seeking to understand the perspectives and lived experiences of other people, especially those people who are vastly different from you in some way. Whereas our tendency is to flatten the personhood of people in "out-groups," who might seem far removed from our daily lives, true analysis (and problem-solving) requires you to ask questions and seek to more fully understand the complexity, the value, of other people and their perspectives.

In one of his most classic theories, Kenneth Burke identifies "systems of meaning" that people use to frame the "human situation." "Out of such frames we derive our vocabularies for charting of human motives. And implicit in our theory of motives is a program of action, since we form ourselves and judge others (collaborating with or against them) in accordance with our attitudes" (*Attitudes* 92). Burke says that one popular way of framing a situation is through the lens of victim and villain, thereby setting up our position on the side of good in the battle against a clear enemy. As we've already discussed in this chapter, this is a very common strategy used in rhetorical discourse to rally support and ultimately villainize anyone with an opposing opinion. Burke identifies this tendency as *scapegoating* when we villainize members of the out-group and blame them for problems outside their control (*Permanence and Change*). Fortunately, Burke points to another frame—the "comic corrective," which operates on a higher level of consciousness to see the misguided notions of the victim/villain dichotomy. Accordingly, the comic attitude "should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its maximum would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness" (*Attitudes* 171). This is not so much a comedy in the traditional sense, as if you'd be laughing with amusement. It's more about recognizing the inherent limitations in all of human thinking. As [Jessica Chaplain](#) writes, "Comedy involves the recognition of a shared humility in that all people, no matter how much they do know, cannot know everything. Comedy requires the ability to recognize and describe human foibles and mistakes in non-essentializing terms" (5). The point, then, is to use Burke's theory of "identification" to find connections and common ground with other people and to find ways to rise above the dichotomous ways of thinking, speaking, and being that focus solely on "right" versus "wrong" or "good" versus "evil." The world we live in and the people we encounter are far more complex.

Write a reflection about your own way of framing the human experience. Are there any situations in which you tend to simplify the issue into the victim versus villain dichotomy? What might it look like for you to take more of a comic corrective approach?

You can also think about issues in which you already have a comic corrective approach. What are these issues? Do you find that other people tend to use the victim versus villain frame when discussing these issues? How might you respond to further the conversation in productive and positive ways?

Discussion Questions

1. The chapter gives several ways that people tend to "flatten" the opposition and oversimplify opposing viewpoints. Discuss some of the theories used in the chapter to explore this phenomenon. What is the danger of oversimplifying alternative perspectives?

2. In their 2020 article, Hollihan and Klumpp argue that our current historical context is a critical moment to reevaluate public discourse and the way

that we engage with debate. What do they mean by this? What examples can you provide? In what ways has digital media exacerbated political turmoil and division?

3. Define ideology. Describe how ideology is embedded in the language that we use every day. Why do scholars like Berlin and Wander argue that it's impossible to have rhetoric that is neutral?

4. Explain Burke's theory of identification. How is language often used to create identifications with an audience that will shape their thinking and compel specific behaviors?

5. How does Pimpare say that our brains process information differently when we are confronted with information that contradicts our preexisting beliefs?

6. This chapter discusses three shifts in rhetorical criticism during the Ideological Turn of the 1980s that put the focus on the ethical consequences of rhetorical discourse. What are those three shifts? How does each one relate to ethics? In what ways is each shift still relevant today?

7. Describe the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning and give your own examples of each one.

8. What are the qualities that make an argument logical?

9. What are the qualities that make an argument illogical? Define what a logical fallacy is, and give some examples from the text. How do these fallacies connect to issues of rhetoric and ideology discussed previously in the chapter?

10. Describe Burke's theory of the "comic corrective."

What does that mean? How can it be used to raise your consciousness regarding the ideologies that are embedded in language and to inform your own response?

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FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

12. Best Practices for Digital Writing

It's probably not surprising that younger generations—millennials and iGens—are more likely to use and have a more intuitive understanding of technology than older generations. According to a study from the [Pew Research Center](#), millennials are ahead of other generations when it comes to owning a smartphone (93%), using the internet (nearly 100%), and subscribing to social media (86%) (Vogels). Other studies report equally high numbers for [Gen Z](#), also known as the iGeneration (Dorsey; Treatt), a group that is often assumed to be more tech savvy than other people because of the significant amount of time that they spend on digital devices. However, exposure to technology doesn't necessarily enhance a person's functional digital literacy—their ability to use a wide range of platforms effectively. In fact, a recent [WorkLife](#) article asserts that it's often a misconception that younger people are innately better at technology (Pickup). In referencing a [2022 study by HP Inc.,](#) Oliver Pickup notes that 20% of employees between the ages of 18 and 29 felt "judged" when they experienced technical issues at work: "While young professionals may be more accustomed to digital environments, and certainly social media platforms, this doesn't always carry over to professional tools," said Debbie Irish, head of the Human Resources Department for HP in Ireland and the UK (qtd. in Pickup). Irish goes on to assert the importance of training, especially for younger professionals who don't have the same experience with specific platforms and have less self-confidence to ask for help. Another study by the [World Economic Forum](#) reports that less than half of young employees have the digital skills they need to be successful, and many employers don't offer the type of training that would help raise their skill level (Moritz and Stubbings).

While it's impossible to prepare beforehand for every possible digital tool you might encounter—either academically or professionally—it is possible to cultivate a problem-solving mindset that allows you to adjust to new technologies that you encounter and figure out the most effective ways to use them to meet your specific purposes. Jill Castek et al. define digital problem-solving as the "nimble use of skills, strategies, and mindsets required to navigate online in everyday contexts, including the library, and use novel resources, tools, and interfaces in efficient and flexible ways to accomplish personal and professional goals" (2). This is a very broad definition that encompasses several different kinds of skills: finding useful information relevant to a particular topic, evaluating the credibility of information, learning how to use various technologies, and being able to discern which technology or platform is most appropriate in a given situation, troubleshooting problems as they arise with an attitude of confidence and patience.

In fact, one key cognitive dimension of digital problem-solving relates to a person's ability to self-regulate, which is the mental process a person goes through when they are solving a problem or working to complete a task. It's the ability to identify your goals, understand the steps that are involved in working toward those goals, and monitor your progress along the way so that you know when it's time to move on to the next step. Castek et al. also assert the need to move beyond the cognitive dimensions of digital problem-solving to also include the "affective motivational domains" (1). In other words, they are interested in understanding how a person's goals drive their use of technology and how their attitudes toward technology affect their problem-solving abilities. Someone with strong digital literacy skills might not always already know how to accomplish specific tasks. The real skill is in knowing how to apply what they already know to new situations, how to find the solutions they are looking for, how to imagine the creative possibilities of a specific tool to help them reach certain goals, and how to apply critical thinking and rhetorical insights to their everyday use of technology.

Like you might expect, the best practices for learning a new technology revolve around open-mindedness, curiosity, and knowing how to utilize resources to get the help you need. Obviously, knowing how to look up information on YouTube is a big help for many of your technology issues. Chances are that experts in a particular field or the creators of a particular platform have put how-to videos on YouTube to help novice (and even more advanced) users work through specific problems or tasks. For instance, SquareSpace is an increasingly popular platform for putting together a website, and there are a number of YouTube videos that walk new subscribers through how to set up their account and how to use the various tools. Similarly, there are numerous tutorials for Photoshop, InDesign, and even word processing applications like Microsoft Word and Google Docs. Using YouTube videos and also resources available online can make a huge difference when it comes to learning a new technology or troubleshooting specific problems. Other best practices are pretty obvious: Be willing to ask for help. Be patient with yourself as you encounter challenges. Give yourself plenty of time to do research and to practice with the platform.

As we've stressed in the previous two units of this textbook, there is an important difference between knowing how and knowing why—utilizing deeper critical and rhetorical thinking to understand your audience, your underlying communication goals, the affordances and constraints of a particular technology, and the underlying ideologies and moral consequences of using specific technologies. For instance, at the time of this writing, the ChatGPT language model has stirred up quite a bit of conversation about the opportunities it provides to create marketing content, write academic papers, and compose more creative pieces like songs and poetry (OpenAI). It seems pretty easy to *use* ChatGPT. You pose the question and then it crafts a response based on information from its databases. But a more critical perspective looks deeper into the moral consequences of having artificial intelligence do our writing for us. A rhetorical perspective would understand the limitations of

ChatGPT when it comes to inaccuracies as well as the more subtle nuances of audience and purpose.

The point is that functional literacy works in tandem with critical and rhetorical literacies in order to make the most effective use of technology. This chapter, in particular, focuses on best writing practices for digital platforms, and it does so from a rhetorical perspective, focusing on the cognitive habits and information-gathering processes of the audience to inform the way that online texts are written. The same principle of knowing *why* applies to the concept of digital writing practices. It's not that difficult to create a website, to subscribe to a social media account and post messages, or to write text messages and emails. Most people know how—or they could easily find out how—to do these things. The real skill comes in knowing why one platform is more appropriate for a given message than another or why specific writing strategies might be more effective with a particular audience than others. While it's easy to post a blog article, you probably know that there are a lot of poorly written blog posts available online that don't follow best digital writing practices and don't consider the needs and perspectives of the audience. As we move into this final unit of the textbook, we'll unpack some of the more "basic" digital writing strategies that are applicable to most online platforms, and as we move forward into the remaining chapters, we'll drill down into specific genre conventions or different platforms and explore more technical aspects of writing and publishing in online spaces.

Learning Objectives

- Understand how functional literacy relates directly

to critical and functional literacy.

- Learn how readers evaluate and process information that they encounter online.
- Understand System 1 and System 2 thinking and the features that distinguish each one.
- Consider how specific writing strategies can be used to engage readers' attention.
- Learn best practices for clear writing that helps readers quickly and easily understand your main ideas.
- Learn how to be concise.
- Understand what it means to have a professional tone and how it can be used to enhance credibility.
- Learn the principles of effective social media monitoring.
- Learn to be direct with a call to action at the end of your messaging.

System 1 and System 2

As you already know, good writing is reader-centered, considering the needs, perspectives, and expectations of the intended audience. In fact, all of your choices in a particular message should (ideally) enhance the audience's understanding and engagement, which in turn, increases their likelihood of responding favorably to your message, either by seeing your perspective on a given topic or taking some sort of action. In digital writing, that means that you must also consider your readers' thought processes, which begins the moment that they encounter your message and make the split-

second decision to read it more carefully or move on to something else. The reality is that readers are pretty impatient when it comes to their reading habits. As we'll see in this section, most people bounce away from a message if they don't immediately see what they are looking for. And because users are constantly bombarded with digital messaging, they are more easily distracted.

To really capture and hold people's attention, you have to be strategic with the way that information is presented, and this is where it will be helpful to understand System 1 and System 2—"fast" thinking and "slow" thinking. In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman describes the two types of thinking that drive people's daily activities and decision-making. System 1 thinking is "fast" thinking. It's impulsive and makes quick decisions based on habits and first impressions. Kahneman describes System 1 as "operating automatically and quickly with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control" (20). System 1 thinking is also typically based on emotional responses and decisions that are comfortable or familiar. Unfortunately, System 1 is almost always running. It guides most of our decisions throughout the day, which allows us to prioritize tasks and conserve time and energy.

A good way to describe System 1 thinking is to think about your daily routine. Most of us have a schedule that we follow from one day to the next or from one week to the next, and once we are familiar with that schedule, we can almost run on autopilot to go from one task to the next. Driving to work or school, for instance, is pretty routine for most people, and it doesn't take a whole lot of critical thinking—at least not on a normal day with normal traffic and weather patterns. You don't have to invest a whole lot of mental energy into the act of driving. In fact, many people sing along to music, have conversations, and think about other things entirely while they are driving, which means that when they arrive at their destination, they probably can't recall the specific places where they had to stop at a red light or the moments when they decided to change lanes. They were on autopilot. The same thing occurs in the morning when you are getting ready for the day, when you order

from your favorite restaurant, when you are making a meal that you've made lots of times before. The same is also true at a store when you are deciding between one product brand and another. You probably don't put a lot of time into researching the pros and cons of each item. You probably make a snap judgment based on the information that is easily accessible, like the price or the packaging.

System 2, in contrast, is the more logical, critical-thinking process where you more deeply engage with a particular topic or event, carefully evaluate your options, and make choices that are grounded in evidence and reason. Kahneman says, "System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration" (21). He goes on to explain that people tend to associate themselves with System 2—"the conscious, reasoning self that has beliefs, makes choices, and decides what to think about and what to do" (21). The problem is that System 2 is lazy. It takes quite a bit more time and mental energy to engage meaningfully in a particular activity and to go through the intellectual task of taking in and evaluating information, and System 2 is reluctant to put in that kind of effort. Fortunately, it's also not always necessary for you to engage System 2. The process of brushing your teeth (or deciding whether to brush your teeth) and making a selection from the dollar menu at McDonald's aren't activities that require a lot of deep, critical thinking.

However, many activities *do* require System 2 thinking. Kahneman explains, "When System 1 runs into difficulty, it calls on System 2 to support more detailed and specific processing that may solve the problem of the moment. System 2 is mobilized when a question arises for which System 1 does not offer an answer" (24). There are some obvious instances when this might occur. Take our driving example above, which is normally pretty routine and can be easily accomplished from System 1. However, if you run into a serious downpour, heavy traffic, or hazardous road conditions because of ice, then System 2 engages. You'd probably turn off your

radio and avoid other distractions or conversations so that you can more fully "focus" on driving. Or if you pull up to the McDonald's drive-thru and discover that they are out of the number-two combo meal that you always order, suddenly you have to look more carefully at the other options and weigh out your choices.

There are also instances when people probably *should* engage System 2 thinking, but they don't because they don't necessarily encounter an immediate problem. For instance, if you're in a meeting or in a class, and you can get by with nodding along during the discussion without really listening to or trying to process or apply the information that is presented, then it's possible that you might not engage System 2. Only when you sense that it's necessary to engage System 2—maybe because there will be a test over the material presented in class or because you have to complete a project based on the information in the meeting—will you do so. In other words, if you perceive that the information is important or relevant in some way, then you will engage more deeply. But how and under what circumstances different people discern information as being important is wildly inconsistent. Some people will be more interested in the topic than others. Some people have better mental habits that allow them to plug in when others are talking. And so on.
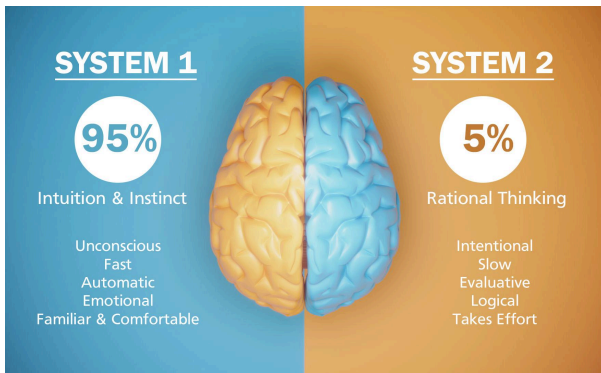
System 1 and System 2 Thinking, by Cara Miller (CC BY)

Understanding people's thought processes—System 1 and

System 2—can significantly enhance your digital writing strategies. If your goal is to get readers to engage System 2, in which they engage with your message and think critically about the information that you are presenting, you have to first capture the attention of System 1, which is no easy task in today's digital realm. According to the Nielsen Norman Group, which specializes in understanding the user experience and the types of information that creates positive user engagement, most web users will only stay on a page for 10 seconds if they don't immediately see the "value proposition"—or the reason that the information provided is relevant and important to their needs. "The first ten seconds of the page visit are critical for users' decision to stay or leave" (Nielsen, "How Long."). That's because they are operating in System 1 to quickly analyze the information provided. In System 1, a user might actively be looking for specific information or they might happen on a page that initially piqued their interest, but if they don't immediately perceive that the information is relevant—based on the title, the pictures, a quick glance at topic sentences—then they will bounce away without engaging System 2. However, if their initial impression of the page is that it is relevant and interesting, then System 2 is mobilized, and they are likely to stay on the page for much longer to read and process the information provided.

The Nielsen Norman Group article ends with this key takeaway from their research: "To gain several minutes of user attention, you must clearly communicate your value proposition within 10 seconds" (Nielsen, "How Long"). Your message might not be relevant to *everyone*, but the people in your target audience must immediately discern that your message is relevant, interesting, and important in some way. The best practices identified in this chapter are geared toward just that—helping readers understand the value of your message so that they will engage their System 2.

Activity 12.1

Write a reflection about your own System 1 and System 2 thinking. In your daily routine, which tasks tend to fall under System 1 because they are automatic and require very little intentional thought? Which tasks require you to engage System 2, applying a deeper level of attention and critical thinking?

Now evaluate your System 2 thinking a little more. Under what circumstances do you tend to activate System 2 thinking? Are there moments when you *should* activate System 2 but you don't? Are you too quick to dismiss information as irrelevant and unimportant?

When it comes to digital messaging, what type of information catches your attention? Think beyond the content itself to consider the structure and the overall approach to the message.

Be Clear

Given that a reader won't engage System 2 unless they perceive that the information presented is relevant to their needs, you have to be as clear as possible to let readers know what the content is about and what they will gain from reading it—that is, the value proposition. Also, remember that System 2 is pretty lazy and that you only have a few seconds from the moment someone lands on your page to convey that value. If the language is difficult to understand or if the main idea of the page is buried somewhere in the fourth paragraph, readers won't engage.

This section provides some basic strategies for making sure that your digital writing content is clear, but first, a quick reminder

about rhetorical context. Many of the best practices listed in this chapter are helpful guidelines for a variety of digital texts, and they align with the audience's expectations in *most* circumstances. However, what we've learned about rhetoric and the use of effective communication is that it's highly contextual. It's important for you to think clearly about your audience and their expectations for a given message. For instance, academic articles are often published on digital platforms, and in that case, the audience—with specialized knowledge in a given field—would expect the text to be long and more complex, with language that other people might not completely understand. Similarly, an email to colleagues in a particular department would likely rely on more technical language in order to communicate key ideas.

The point is that the writing must still be clear—easy to follow and with easily identifiable main ideas—but your approach to clear writing might be different from one context to the next, depending on your audience and also your message. We'll talk more in-depth about genre selection and conventions in later chapters. While some of these best practices might be applied a little differently depending on the circumstances, the general principles are consistent. Below are important guidelines to make sure your writing is clear:

- **Put the main idea of the text in your title.** Many web genres have titles—blog posts, web pages, some social media ads, and emails. The very first thing that readers look at when deciding whether the information is relevant to them is the title, so don't be cryptic or overly creative. A short, clear title that identifies the value proposition will be more effective in grabbing the attention of people in your target audience. For instance, a blog titled "10 Best Vacation Spots in Indiana" gives a very clear picture of what the article will be about. On the other hand, the title "Pack Your Bags" doesn't immediately convey the main idea of the article and would be less likely to get the attention of readers, even those readers who might

otherwise have been interested in the article. The title didn't seem relevant to their needs.

- **Use headings and subheadings.** Especially for longer texts, breaking it up into smaller sections with headings and even subheadings can be a very effective way to help readers stay engaged and follow along with the main ideas. Once again, it's important that headings be descriptive so readers have an idea of what the section will be about. Headings are especially common for blog articles and web pages, but they can also be effective for longer emails. Put headings in bold so they are easier to spot.

- **Put the most important information near the beginning**. It's okay to hook readers into a longer blog article with a clever opener, but pretty quickly, the intro paragraph should identify the main idea. For shorter social media posts and emails, it's usually best to lead with your main point in the very first sentence.

- **Keep the language and sentence structure simple.** That doesn't mean that you have to "speak down" to your audience or craft overly simple sentences that are short and choppy. It does mean that you'd avoid jargon that might alienate or frustrate some people in your target audience. You'd also avoid consistently long, complex sentences that are difficult to untangle. Generally speaking, digital writing tends to be pretty conversational. Writing that is overly formal or advanced is not only more difficult to understand, but it doesn't create emotional connections with readers and probably doesn't communicate the type of brand that you are trying to build.

- **Use precise language.** A lot of beginning writers tend to be fairly vague in their writing, which always leaves lingering questions in the minds of readers and has less of an impact than writing that is more specific. Vague writing always invites the question "Can you be more specific?" For example, let's consider a blog article about the importance of wearing a seat belt. If the article begins with a "recent" narrative in which the

author was "severely injured" in a car accident because they weren't wearing their seat belt, you probably have enough information to generally understand the main idea. However, you'd probably also want to know more about "how recent" the incident was and also what made the injury so severe. Similarly, if the blog cited "recent studies" about the efficacy of seat belts, you'd want to know which specific studies the author is referring to. While it's probably not necessary to include every minute detail, good writing is always specific and uses language that is precise.

- **Use hyperlinks.** Adding hyperlinks to relevant information is an easy way to clarify information, build credibility, and point readers toward additional resources. So if a blog does mention a particular study or article, a hyperlink to that specific study gives readers a chance to read the study for themselves and understand how it supports a particular idea presented in the blog. All platforms are slightly different, but the idea of a hyperlink is that you aren't breaking up text with a long URL. You select appropriate words and phrases within the text to become the hyperlink. Highlight those specific words, click the "insert link" icon, and then paste the URL of the outside web page into the dialogue box.

- **Repeat keywords.** No, we're not talking about SEO yet. Repeating certain keywords and phrases that capture the main idea of the text will help readers follow along. Those keywords would obviously appear in the title, and then when it's repeated in the introduction and in subsequent paragraphs, it helps readers to make important connections and see how one idea builds on the next. Obviously, you don't want to be overly redundant, but you do want to be mindful of your keywords and how they can be used to enhance readers' understanding.

Be Concise

Another important best practice for digital writing is to be concise. Avoid long sentences and long blocks of text. You can probably resonate with the fact that large text blocks can be overwhelming and discourage readers from engaging with the text. In fact, most readers don't actually read a web page word for word; they scan (Nielsen, "How Users Read"), only taking in about 20% of the information on the page (Nielsen, "How Little"). Finding ways to tighten up your sentences and organize information into smaller sections improves readability and helps readers persist through the main points of your message.

- **Condense information.** This is often easier said than done, but many times, writers include unnecessary details and information that could easily be cut and still convey the same overall meaning. You'd also avoid redundancies, find ways to shorten wordy sentences, and eliminate "filler" words that don't add meaning. The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has some excellent suggestions for condensing long sentences. Chapter 18 of this textbook also provides useful strategies.
- **Organize information into chunks.** While paragraphs in print publications might be fairly long (sometimes up to 10 or more sentences), paragraphs on digital writing platforms are short—around two to five sentences. In addition to keeping paragraphs short, longer articles are also broken down into different sections with clear headings. This is called "chunking" your content, and it makes the key ideas easier to follow. Limit the length of each section to just a few paragraphs.
- **Use hyperlinks.** Once again, hyperlinks can be a helpful tool to keep texts short. Instead of elaborating on specific details from a separate web page, creating a hyperlink to that page allows readers to find the information for themselves and eliminates

clutter in your message.

- **Use bullets.** Another strategy for increasing the readability of your texts is to create bulleted lists where appropriate. Since readers tend to scan long paragraphs, often missing the key information embedded, the bulleted list makes it easier for readers to quickly see all of the key points in a list.
- **Write in an active voice.** Active voice puts the emphasis on the person or thing that is doing the action, whereas passive voice emphasizes the person or thing that is acted upon. Active voice tends to be shorter and easier to understand. For instance, "Jenny made a cake last night and then ate a big piece before bed" is in active voice and it puts the focus on Jenny and her actions. It's much easier to understand than the passive version: "The cake was made last night by Jenny, and a big piece was eaten by Jenny before she went to bed." It's always better to use active voice when you can.
- **Eliminate "be" verbs when possible.** Often "be" verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) are wordier and less meaningful than alternative verbs and phrases. For instance, instead of saying, "We will be eating dinner at 5 p.m.," the sentence "We will eat dinner at 5 p.m." is slightly shorter and creates a stronger verb more relevant to the main idea of the sentence. Here are a number of other strategies for eliminating "be" verbs, created by Beacon Point.

Be Professional

It probably goes without saying that you want your content to come across as professional. That doesn't mean that it has to be stuffy or boring. It does mean that the writing would demonstrate your maturity and understanding of writing strategies that build your credibility and invite readers to engage. While there might not be a set definition of what makes writing "unprofessional," the effect

is that it comes across as self-centered, unfocused, or lazy. For instance, writing that doesn't seem to have a clear main point, meandering from one topic to the next and interweaving personal stories and opinions, might be okay for a personal journal or diary, but it would come across as unprofessional on a web page because it isn't considerate of readers' needs and expectations. Similarly, writing that is filled with grammar and punctuation errors would come across as unprofessional because it seems lazy—and it makes it much harder to read a message. In general, best practices for professional writing include the following:

- **Avoid slang.** While there might be occasion (rhetorically speaking) to use slang in a blog article or social media post, you'd probably want to avoid it most of the time—especially words and phrases that are only familiar to a narrow group of people. Using slang alienates some readers who don't know the meaning of the slang terms. It also might not be appropriate for articles or web pages with a more professional purpose.
- **Avoid language that is inappropriate or offensive.** Always. This is a hard and fast rule. Cuss words and other language that comes across as rude, sexist, racist, homophobic, ageist, and so on should always be avoided, even if you're writing a simple text message to a friend, and the inside joke seems harmless enough. You never know who will see that message or how your language might be taken out of context.
- **Stick to your purpose.** Stay focused on one clear main idea and the evidence and reasoning that helps to develop that idea. Personal asides and other tangents can be very frustrating to readers who are looking for specific information.
- **Be respectful.** Part of being professional is being accommodating to different ideas and perspectives and to treat alternative viewpoints with respect. Posts or emails written in anger or with little regard for differing opinions will come across as childish and self-centered. That doesn't mean that you must always agree with other people or that you can't

verbalize your own position on a topic, but your writing should invite calm, reasoned engagement from other perspectives instead of being dismissive or condescending.

- **Proofread.** Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling can go a long way to build credibility. That's not to say that every single comma must be in the correct spot or that you'll lose readers' attention if you have one fragment sentence, but writing that is full of errors is hard to read, and it gives the impression that you didn't put as much time and energy into the message as you could have.

Be Engaged

Successful digital writing that truly engages audiences and develops a strong brand demonstrates a level of author engagement—your effort to be involved in conversations with people as they respond to your content. This is called "monitoring," and though it might not be part of your original content, the way that you respond to comments, questions, and complaints becomes part of a public thread that other people can see, and it can have a significant influence on their perception of you and your brand.

At a minimum, monitoring means that you keep tabs on and respond appropriately to comments on your digital channels—web pages, blog articles, social media accounts—which helps you understand how your audience is reacting to your content and maintain a positive brand identity. The advantage of so many of these platforms is that they offer the opportunity for readers to participate in the conversation and for writers to engage with their audience on a deeper level. Even simple metrics like the number of views, shares, and likes help you understand how people are responding to your message, but more than that, you should pay attention to the comments that people post—this includes positive feedback as well as questions and even negative comments. This

allows you to offer additional information and to try to understand and address the more negative comments. Below are a few best practices for monitoring audience engagement:

- Respond thoughtfully to at least some of the positive feedback. You might not be able to respond to everyone, but having a presence in the discussion thread lets people see that you are engaged in the conversation.
- Provide complete and specific answers to relevant questions.
- Be respectful as you engage with negative comments. You might not be able to come to an easy resolution in every circumstance, but your effort can go a long way toward building trust and goodwill, if not with that specific person then at least with other people who read the discussion thread.
- Avoid the urge to delete every negative comment. That makes it seem like you are hiding something or unwilling to engage with anyone with a different perspective.
- Delete comments that are offensive in nature. This includes comments with profanity as well as comments that are threatening or that resort to name-calling. In some instances, you might even screenshot the post before you delete it, so you can report it to the platform administrators.
- Consider ways to monitor discussions about your brand in other places. This might include customer reviews, posts where you are tagged in a photo, brand hashtags, and @ mentions.

Be Direct

One final suggestion for many of the posts that you write is to be direct. Often there is a particular way that you will want audiences to respond, especially if your post is related to some sort of campaign or marketing strategy. You might want your audience to

click a link to get more information, to sign up to receive your newsletter, to purchase a particular product, to schedule a meeting, or to go to your website. Even when you send an email to colleagues or clients, there is often a response that you are looking for—maybe a deadline that a project should be completed or the answer to a question that you have. Whatever it is that you want the audience to do as a result of your message, be direct about it. Most blog articles, web pages, and even emails end with a CTA (call to action) that tells readers exactly what you want them to do next and gives them all of the information they need to take that action. You're much more likely to get the response you are looking for with clear and direct instructions.

Activity 12.2

Social media platforms are full of posts that you can use to critique and improve your own writing. Find a social media post or blog article that relies heavily on written content and evaluate it for the best practices identified above. The exercise will probably work better if you identify content written by a company or organization as opposed to an individual on a personal account.

Now review the content of the post you've selected. Is it clear? Concise? Professional? Engaged (in the discussion thread)? Direct about CTAs? What are the post's strengths? What could still be improved? Write a revised, improved version of the post that follows each of the best practices.

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1. The beginning of the chapter noted that functional literacy works in conjunction with rhetorical and critical literacy. What does this mean? How is functional literacy (learning how) informed by both critical and rhetorical literacy?
2. Which elements of the rhetorical situation seem especially relevant to this section on best practices for digital writing? Why?
3. What is System 1 thinking? How does it work? Give some examples.
4. What is System 2 thinking? How does it work? Give some examples.
5. In what circumstances does System 2 activate? In particular, how can digital writing strategies be used to engage readers' System 2 thinking?
6. What is the value proposition? Why is it important to be clear and upfront about the value proposition of a text? Can you find examples online where this is done well?
7. What are some other important strategies for making sure that your message is clear and easy for your intended audience to understand?
8. What are some key strategies for concise writing?
9. In the context of this chapter, what does "professional" writing mean? Why is it important?
10. What is social media monitoring and why is it important? What are some ways that an author can effectively engage with their audience?

11.   What is a CTA, and why is it important to include in digital messaging?

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13. Writing the Genres of the Web

The previous chapter identified some of the best practices for digital writing that will help engage readers' interest and make it easier for them to pick out the main ideas in a text. Most of those general principles are consistent across different web genres, but the reality is that not all web writing is the same. Writing strategies and accepted standards differ depending on what it is that you are writing—depending on which *genre*. A genre is a type of writing, a category that can be distinguished because it has certain qualities. Often when you think of a genre, you might think of a type of literature—for instance, fantasy, science fiction, romance—and you can tell which genre it is because of the type of story that it is and the way that the plot unfolds. Or you might think about types of music—for example, country, rap, heavy metal, classic rock. Again, you'd probably be able to identify the genre of a song pretty quickly based on the melody, the instruments involved, and the lyrics. Webster's Dictionary defines genre as a "category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content." However, even that definition is too narrow to accurately capture the idea of a genre because it doesn't have to be "artistic" or "literary." A text message, for instance, is a genre with defining qualities that separate it from other writing styles—the use of emojis, acronyms, GIFs, and short conversational messages. Text messages tend to be less formal, reserved for close family and friends, which helps dictate what is appropriate. In contrast, a résumé is a completely different genre, written for a different audience and purpose and with very different elements of format, tone, and content. If you'd never written a résumé before, you'd have to learn how to format your document appropriately and what type of information should be included. You'd also pay attention to

writing style and tone, which is more formal and serious in nature. You'd never (hopefully) write a résumé with emojis, text acronyms, or memes. Your résumé wouldn't be taken seriously.

In a similar way, there are a variety of web genres with specific features that help distinguish one from another, and those features correspond with particular purposes and audience expectations. In fact, like all rhetorical considerations, your selection of genre and your choice to follow certain genre conventions relate directly to your purpose and audience. The School of Writing, Literature, and Film at Oregon State University calls genre a "typified rhetorical action," meaning that certain features are repeated across different genres "because audiences expect certain things to happen or they want certain kinds of experiences" (Pflugfelder). In other words, the audience is more receptive to a message when it follows conventional patterns that they are familiar with. While there might certainly be occasions to stray from particular genre conventions in specific rhetorical situations, following the accepted standards helps build your credibility with the audience, enhances readers' understanding of the message, and increases the chances that the audience will respond favorably.

This chapter takes a closer look at the most common web genres and the conventions and rhetorical considerations of each one. It also provides a deeper explanation of genre convention, which will allow you to identify these conventions in other types of writing that aren't discussed here. The main idea is to consider the audience's needs and expectations and how certain conventions will create more positive and compelling reader experiences.

Learning Objectives

- Understand what a genre convention is and how it is used to meet rhetorical objectives.
- Think deeper about the social function of genre conventions and the ways that they aid in the reader's experience with a text.
- Identify the conventions of writing genres that you are familiar with and be able to apply the concept of genre convention to genres that may be new to you.
- Understand the rhetorical functions of a website and how individual components of a website work toward these larger goals.
- Learn the specific genre conventions of a website and how each one aids in the reader experience and helps move them through the customer journey.
- Learn content strategies for other types of digital writing, including blogs, social media posts, and email campaigns. Be able to identify the conventions of each genre.
- Consider ways to learn the conventions of other, more specialized genres that you encounter.

Defining Genre Convention

Before we look at specific web genres, it might be helpful to take a closer look at genre conventions in general and why they are so important for all kinds of writing. If a genre is a particular category of writing, then a genre convention is a particular feature that is definitive of that genre, helping readers to easily understand what it is and how it should be read. You might remember from chapter

8 in this textbook that rhetoric is inherently social. It facilitates human relationships and activities, which is why so much emphasis is placed on the audience. A genre is also social. New genres emerge alongside new technologies and new ways of interacting with other people. An X post, for instance, is a relatively new genre that has expanded the ways people can communicate and the variety of audiences they can communicate with. It enhances communication, and because it continues to address specific needs, people still use it. In contrast, handwritten letters and postcards, though not completely out of fashion, aren't nearly as popular as they once were because new genres (and technologies) have taken their place. They aren't needed because newer and faster ways of communicating are available.

So when we consider various genres and the conventions that define each one, it's helpful to think more deeply about their social function—the activity or type of communication that a particular genre affords. In discussing the rhetorical interplay between genre and medium, the [Purdue OWL](#) explains that "genre is a form of writing with set functions determined by its social need" ("Genre and Medium"). For instance, a grocery list developed out of the need to remember a large number of items that you need to purchase, and so the list—along with its classic convention of short, bulleted items, separated on different lines—emerged as a way to quickly and easily identify the things you want to purchase.

Perhaps the social function of a genre and its corresponding conventions becomes easiest to understand when we consider a genre that *doesn't* follow the standard convention. What if you were asked by a friend to go to the store to purchase a few items, and they handed you a grocery list they had created, but instead of following the typical format of each item on a separate line, their "list" had everything running together so that it looked more like a paragraph. And instead of having just the name of each item they need, they wrote everything out in sentence form, explaining more about the item and why they need it. You'd have an entire page full of words, and it would be incredibly difficult to

pick out the items on their list. It would take you a long time to read through everything, and because everything is run together, chances are that you'd miss some of the things on their list.

Another classic example of genre is the job résumé. Obviously, the content of a résumé is very personal, tailored to highlight individual qualifications and experiences and also adapted to a specific audience/employer. You might also have noticed if you have used some sort of template to create your own résumé that the layout might change slightly depending on your design preferences and the types of information that you want to highlight. However, there are some basic features that all résumés have in common. You can probably name several off the top of your head. They are typically written in black type with a legible font like Arial or Times New Roman. They have the person's name and contact information at the top. They have clear headings for professional experience, education, special skills, and references. They are short, typically no longer than a single page. These are fairly simple conventions, but they are important. They facilitate the rhetorical purpose of the résumé by making it easier to quickly highlight key qualifications and skills that will be persuasive to an employer. They also make it easier to write the résumé, since the formatting and basic content are already established. What's more, these genre conventions make it easier for the audience to read and interpret the résumé. Assuming an employer would be familiar with the genre of a résumé, they can quickly scan the document and easily pick out key information that will help them move forward in the decision-making process.

As you can see, a single genre often includes several conventions that make it distinct, and these conventions include a lot of different elements including formatting, tone, organizational structure, and the content itself. Understanding the underlying reason for various conventions and how they aid in the reader experience will enhance your writing in a few different ways. First of all, it will be more readable because it adheres to writing patterns that readers are familiar with, so they can more easily pick out your

main ideas. Any time you come across a new genre, you will likely struggle at first to understand what the conventions are and how to adapt your writing so that it seems authentic but still adheres to the audience's expectations. However, cultivating an awareness of genre will help you make this transition, as it will play a key role in the writing and revision processes. Second, genres provide greater opportunity for creativity and deep critical thinking. That might seem counterintuitive given that genres create parameters that seem to limit your creative options, but the reality is that a genre is a productive lens that guides your writing and thinking process. In terms of the rhetorical situation, genres are created to meet particular purposes that respond to certain exigencies; therefore, focusing on the genre conventions will enhance your ability to write something meaningful. Finally, following genre conventions increases your credibility because it signals to readers that you are experienced in this genre and have thought about their needs and expectations. Even conventions that seem relatively minor will demonstrate your expertise and attention to detail, which will go a long way to spark goodwill and similar generosity in your audience.

Activity 13.1

Make a list of all of the different genres that you write in each day. This might include anything from the more mundane texts, such as lists or text messages, to documents that are longer and more complex. Which genres are you most familiar with? Which ones are you still learning? See if you can identify the social function of each genre.

Emails

We'll begin with a genre that most people are already familiar with—the email. From a rhetorical standpoint, your approach to an email depends largely on the context of your message—who your audience is and the subject of your email—but generally speaking, emails are considered more formal than text messages and should avoid being overly informal or using "texty" language and emojis. From a professional standpoint, there are a couple of different types of emails that you might have to write. The first and most obvious is a work-related email to a colleague, client, or vendor, in which case you obviously want to be friendly but also to the point. Just like other types of digital writing, emails should be fairly brief if possible with content broken down into individual paragraphs and bulleted information for enhanced readability. You might also need to hyperlink to websites and other documents that are pertinent to the conversation. You'd probably also have some sort of call to action (CTA) at the end, even if just to invite that person to let you know if they have more questions or to request that they get back to you about a specific question or issue.

The second type of professional email is a marketing tool, a message that is part of a targeted campaign, and it's a way of reaching out individually to leads that your company has acquired.

Remember that one of the functions of a website is to generate leads. Companies then use that list of current and prospective customers to send targeted emails, often giving them more information about a specific promotion, letting them know that the latest blog post is available, inviting them to an event, and so on. Obviously, these types of emails can get annoying, and people will quickly "unsubscribe" or assign them to their spam folder if they don't find the information to be useful. That's why you should be very intentional about the type of content (and how much content) that you send and focus on the leads that have expressed genuine interest in your organization. For emails that are part of a concerted marketing campaign, several genre conventions can be applied:

- **Have a clear subject line.** Just like blog articles and social media posts will engage attention with a specific and catchy title, so will an email title. Since most people get hundreds of emails each day, you want to create a title that will grab their attention and says something specific about what the message entails. While different email platforms vary, you'd generally want your title to be shorter than 60 characters so it doesn't get cut off.
- **Write preview text.** Some email platforms also show preview text, sort of like a subtitle that provides additional information or a slightly different hook, typically 45 characters or less (Slater).
- **Keep it short.** Once again, less is more. A couple of short paragraphs are all you really have to engage the reader so that they understand the value of what you are offering and feel compelled to take action.
- **Have a clear CTA.** Since these emails are often used as an internal marketing tool to draw people to your site, the call to action does just that. It prompts readers to click a link so they can read the new blog article, get more information about a product or event, and so on.
- **Provide contact information.** A professional signature should

include the sender's name, company logo, phone number, and email address so that the reader can easily follow up with questions.

Websites

Almost all businesses maintain a website as the "front door" to their organization, realizing that before most customers set foot in the store (if there is a physical space), they will go to the website to get information about store hours, products, mission, and so on. It's the first impression most people will have about the organization, so providing useful content, organizing information effectively, and using rhetorical strategies to engage readers will create a positive user experience and strengthen the organization's brand. Even individuals sometimes maintain websites for personal or professional reasons, knowing that they will reach a much wider audience and have access to design tools that will create a positive connection.

As we discuss the various other web genres—blogs, social media posts, emails, and so on—it's important to keep in mind that these are often used as collateral marketing tools that serve the primary function of guiding people back to the website, where they can learn more information about a particular event or product, make a purchase, schedule an appointment, and so on. Leland Dieno, an entrepreneur and expert in digital marketing, says, "Your website is the center of your digital ecosystem," meaning that everything else revolves around the content you provide there. It's *the* place where users will go to find information, and if it's organized well, it will create a clear path to help them learn about your organization and respond positively to your call to action, whatever that might be. [Kunjan Mehta](#) explains it like this:

Web development can help you create a clear path for where you want your customers to go, how they will get

there, and what the goals are for your audience. Everything else you do stems from these aspects and connects back to your website. No matter what else is involved with your digital ecosystem, the ultimate goal is to direct all online activity back to your website.

Website development is a very big topic, and there are many nuances in functionality (which continue to evolve quickly with new integrations and plugin updates) and differences from one web platform to the next. Many businesses pay web developing companies thousands of dollars to create and update their website, but advancements in digital tools and user-friendly platforms have also made it possible for people to create and maintain their own website—if they are willing to take some time to learn how. While it's beyond the scope of this textbook to discuss the "how-to" aspect of the different web hosting platforms, there are numerous resources available that do. For instance, WebsiteBuilderInsider has created a [resource guide](#) for web development that discusses many different aspects of the planning stages (Brandon). There are also a number of articles online, like [this one by Niel Patel](#), that give an overview of the different website platforms and the pros and cons of each one. Once you decide on a platform, there are also numerous YouTube videos, created by the hosting services as well as experienced users, to help you get started and to troubleshoot various issues.

The main goal of this section of the textbook is to help you think more clearly about the purpose of the website and how to develop content to help you meet that purpose. We'll also discuss best practices in website design.

Functionality

A website has a number of different purposes, and while the specific functions of a website will obviously vary from one circumstance

to another, at its core, a website is typically designed with five key purposes in mind:

1. **Attract visitors.** One of the main functions of a website is to attract people's attention, to engage them with the information presented and the overall mission and service that is provided. We'll talk in more detail in the next chapter about SEO and ways to optimize a website so that users can easily find your web page. For right now, we'll focus on the idea of [inbound marketing](), which relates to strategies that web developers and content writers use to draw people to their sites (Hubspot). As opposed to outbound marketing tactics that push content out to a broad audience (think billboards, magazine ads, television commercials), inbound marketing works harder to identify the wants, needs, and values of the target audience and to create web content that is relevant to those expectations. As content is developed, there is special consideration given to users' pain points and the potential search terms (keywords) they might use to find information about how to solve those problems. This is one way that a website becomes "[optimized]()" so that a website becomes easier to find and use (Fitzgerald). Other strategies include

   ◦ Creating unique [meta descriptions]() for each web page. A meta description is the information that appears on the search engine results page (SERP) (Google Search Central), and it includes the URL, a title of the page that users can click on to get to the web page, and a "[snippet]()" of text that gives a description of the content on that page (Riddall). By providing relevant and interesting information and a call to action, a website is much more likely to attract visitors. The image below is an example of a meta description of what a snippet might look like if you searched for the best beach destinations in the United States. It even includes a picture to entice visitors.

Woman Lying on White Sand Beach, by Riccardo under a Pexels license, Snippet text by Cara Miller.

- Creating [meta tags](#) for other content on the page—titles, alt tags for images and graphics, headers (Hughes).
- Creating a [Google Business Profile](#) that provides contact information, business hours, customer reviews, and other helpful information for potential customers (Caplan). It not only builds awareness about a business but also builds credibility and provides a path directly to the website.

2. **Provide useful content.** This goes hand in hand with the purpose listed above—to attract visitors. Many of the strategies used to attract visitors have to do with meta descriptions and strategies that make a website visible to potential customers. However, there are many SEO practices designed to mislead users so that it *looks* like a web page has relevant and interesting content. For instance, [keyword stuffing](#) is an attempt to rank higher on the SERP by continually repeating keywords and phrases over and over (BigCommerce Essentials). Even if this were to position a web page higher on the SERP (which it doesn't), it creates a negative user experience because a page that uses this strategy is often difficult to read and doesn't provide the types of information that a visitor is looking for. So they will very quickly bounce off the page. Successful content writers carefully consider the needs and expectations of their target audience. They think through the types of information that users will be looking for,

the questions that they might have as they navigate the site, and they are intentional about making that information easy to find and easy to understand. In fact, a large part of an organization's content strategy revolves around pinpointing the type of content that users are looking for and making it easy to find (Forsey). This relates directly to the meta descriptions you provide for each page, but it also includes choices regarding website navigation, titles and subheadings, the way information is organized on a page, and the design choices you make. It also relates to the language you use and your effort to be upfront and specific. This will not only engage visitors but create a positive experience and help build trust with potential customers.

3. **Strengthen your brand.** An obvious function of a website is to communicate the unique identity and mission of an organization to the audience. It's an opportunity to fully develop your story—the history of the organization, profiles of organizational leaders and staff members, the mission of the organization, customer testimonials, and so on. Remember that a brand is your image—the way that you want others to perceive you. It relates directly to the way that people perceive your values, personality, work ethic, community culture. When visitors have positive experiences and impressions on a website, it not only strengthens their perception of the organization, but it increases the chances that they will leave positive reviews, share information about the organization, and use their personal social media accounts to like, share, and repost content that will shape others' perceptions of the organization as well. Since we talked at length about branding in chapter 9, we won't rehash it here. Suffice it to say that an organization's efforts at branding can sometimes be explicit, related to things like its logo and tagline, mission statement, history, credentials and certifications, staff photos and profiles, charity involvement, and customer reviews. It can also relate to more subtle cues—how easy it is to find information on the

website, how well information is organized, how company policies are communicated, the tone of the language and overall design, and of course, how satisfied customers are with the service they receive when they do engage with an organization.

4. **Prompt action.** Remember that rhetorically, websites are developed with a purpose in mind—a particular way that the speaker wants the audience to respond. To that end, everything on the website should be working toward that end goal to compel readers to respond. However, an effective website will also give a [call to action (CTA)](#) that explicitly tells readers what they should do next and then points them in the right direction (Optimizely). Of course, different messages might have different CTAs depending on their purpose and where visitors might be in their buyer journey. Some CTAs might simply prompt readers to "read more" about a particular service or concept or to "schedule an appointment" or "get a free quote" to help move them forward in the buyer journey. Others might want readers to sign up for a newsletter, share something on social media, volunteer for an event, sign up for a free trial, or "buy now." Web pages that direct readers about what they should do next and provide a clear path to take that action are much more likely to meet their communication goals.

5. **Generate leads.** It's probably not a first priority to collect contact information of potential customers, but one important function of a website is to [generate leads](#) so it's easy to communicate with current and potential customers about services, events, and product updates (Boyarsky). For instance, many websites have contact forms where users can put in their information (an email probably and maybe an email address or mailing address) in order to get more information or to receive a response about a question or problem. Other websites have pop-up windows inviting users to subscribe to a newsletter or sign up for a free trial. Using these and many other strategies,

user information is collected and stored in a spreadsheet or a lead management platform that makes it easy to deliver content directly to users via email, text message, or mail. This can be a very effective way to drive more traffic to your website and create consistent engagement with people in your target market. On the other hand, many websites use [deceptive strategies](#) to collect user information (Baydin). Maybe a visitor wants to get more information about a product or service, but they are required to put in their email address in order to access that information. Deceptive lead generation strategies trick users into providing their contact information or they collect this information without user permission, through some sort of third-party organization that sells leads. That's when people receive what they consider to be spam emails and text messages and feel bombarded, even harassed, by marketing schemes they don't care about. Those are the types of experiences that create negative impressions and undermine the brand that you are trying to create.

Genre Conventions for a Website

Genre conventions are always connected to purpose, allowing readers to quickly and easily engage with the ideas of a text. Website conventions are no exception. However, a visitor arrives on a web page—via a Google search or a link on a social media post or in an email—chances are they are looking for specific information. They are interested in learning more about the product, service, mission, event, or concept highlighted on that page, but as we've already discussed, most visitors don't spend much time at all reading a web page. They scan headlines and subheadings. They skim through bulleted lists. They might quickly scan the navigation bar at the top. And if they don't find what they are looking for, they will bounce away. The best practices for a website listed below are reader-

centered, geared toward engaging visitors and making it easy for them to quickly find the information they need.

- **Streamline the content.** Be selective as you prioritize the information on a page and the number of pages on a website. Though larger organizations might need larger websites with more menu items and web pages, big websites are often more difficult for users to navigate because there is more content to sift through, and it's often harder to find the information they are looking for. Having a streamlined site map with a few key menu items and shorter web pages that are easy to read will go a long way to keep readers engaged. In other words, sometimes less is more.
- **Put the most important information first on the page.** This is called an inverted pyramid structure (Purdue OWL, "The Inverted Pyramid"). Putting the most important information first will help it stand out to readers, who can then read on to get more detailed information about that particular topic as they move down the page. However, if they have to scroll or if the key information is buried within large chunks of text, readers are much less likely to stay on the page. And if they don't stay to read the entire page (as most readers don't), then they will have at least gotten the main idea. Clearly labeled titles and subheadings (in larger, bold font than the rest of the text) will also help.
- **Be intentional about organization.** According to *The Web Project Guide*, successful website organization entails three things: grouping like content together, creating a logical navigation system, and providing clear labels (Vilhauer et al.). Often a useful way to organize content on your website is through categories, where pages are grouped together because they have similar content. For instance, many websites have an "About" section on the main navigation menu at the top of the home page. This could include a drop-down menu with several content pages: mission statement, employee

profiles, company history, and so on. Figuring out how similar items should be grouped together is the first step. Then you need to create a site map, demonstrating the organizational structure of your site and using clear menu labels. This Creately.com website provides free tools that allow users to create their own site map, or you can always draw it out on a piece of paper.

- **Focus on readability.** This includes all of the strategies that guide a reader through the content of a web page so it's easy for them to pick out the main idea: Headings, subheadings, bulleted lists, short paragraphs, simple sentence structures, and word choice that is clear and specific. Readability also relates to the formatting choices that you make. For instance, websites tend to use a font that is sans serif, which makes it easier to read. Similarly, higher-level text like titles and subtitles might be in bold and in a larger font than the rest of the text. Items should be spaced appropriately so that things aren't crammed together, but readers can still tell which items go together.

- **Be specific.** People visiting the site are looking for certain types of information about products, services, upcoming events, pricing, and so on. It's your job to carefully consider the information that readers are looking for and to provide that information so that it's clear. Readers will quickly become frustrated with vague, flowery text that doesn't really tell them anything. Product descriptions, for instance, would go beyond a list of adjectives to also include product dimensions, items that are included, capabilities, other outside items needed for use, and any other information that would help them determine whether they want to buy the product. Certainly, there's a balance between streamlining content and providing enough detail. The point is to use the space that you have to give content that is meaningful for readers, and to provide opportunities to get more information.

- **Use hyperlinks.** Hyperlinks help visitors make connections.

This can be especially helpful as they are navigating your site. Internal links to relevant pages guide readers to more detailed information on your website about a specific topic. Similarly hyperlinks at the bottom of a web page that coincide with the call to action to schedule an appointment or get more information increase the likelihood of a user taking that action. External links to credible, relevant web pages are also useful in building your own credibility and providing important information to readers without taking up more room on the page. Obviously, you'd want to be strategic about hyperlinks, limiting the amount on a given page so readers aren't overwhelmed. You'd also want to be selective about the words that you choose for a hyperlink so that it's fairly clear what type of information readers will find if they follow the link. For example, let's say that a fitness blog has the following sentence: "There are many different methods for increasing your stamina during a workout." If the words "different methods" or "increasing your stamina" were hyperlinked (as evidenced by the telltale blue, underlined text), then readers would expect that it links to more information about what those methods are. On the other hand, if they are taken to a product page with running shoes for sale, they'd likely be confused and probably a little frustrated.

- **Use visuals.** Consider the types of pictures and other images that will help engage readers. Visuals have several different purposes on a web page. On one hand, they can be used to help clarify information. A map or a pie graph, for instance, is a visual that can be used to support written content on a page and help readers more easily process that information. The same might be said for a table, chart, or photo. A company that sells cars, for instance, would obviously include pictures of the car that they are trying to sell so that readers have a clearer understanding of what it looks like. Visuals can also be used for branding—to help visitors get a clear sense of the personality or mission of a person or organization. For instance, a

children's hospital would likely use photos of doctors working with children, particularly pictures where the children are smiling. These types of photos would go a long way to demonstrate the level of care and compassion the hospital provides. It would also be a very persuasive element that would make visitors more likely to bring their children to that hospital or to donate money. Visuals serve several different rhetorical functions, which is why they are so important to include on your website.

- **Think aesthetics.** A website that is visually appealing is much more likely to engage readers. As discussed in chapter 10, various design elements can be used to help convey meaning. Color choice, font size, font design, graphics, and images can all be used to direct readers' attention and help them more easily read and understand the information. But design choices also affect the overall user experience and develop the ethos of the organization. According to this [Crowdbotics article](#) about the "Aesthetic of Modern Web Design," the aesthetics of a website includes the overall layout with different components, menus, buttons, images, icons, colors, fonts, and so on. It also incorporates interactive features, such as sounds, animations, and symbols. Together, these features create a user-friendly appearance and leave an impact on the intended audience.
- **Provide clear calls to action.** Almost every page on a website has a call to action that explicitly invites users to take the next step to find out more information, to donate money, to buy a product, to read a full article, and so on. These might be as buttons or clear statements with a hyperlink at the bottom of the page.
- **Keep content updated.** One way to quickly lose credibility is to have information on your website that is clearly outdated. Maybe there are links that no longer work or information that is no longer relevant. Perhaps the calendar of events still hasn't been updated and still includes information from previous months. This is a cue for readers that maintaining the website

isn't a big priority for you and that much of the information might not be accurate. In addition to updating the information, swapping out new pictures or videos is a great way to keep the website fresh, demonstrating an active online presence and an effort to continually engage with your target audience.

Activity 13.2

Identify a local organization or company that you are familiar with and write down a few things that you know about this company. What do they do? What do you think is their mission? What are some ways that you would describe this company's brand?

Now visit the website and consider the messaging that is available there. How does the website develop the organization's brand? In what ways does it help visitors navigate the site? What key information is available on the site that would be important for first-time visitors?

Now draw a rough sketch of the organization's site map. This should include the main menu items that are available from the home page as well as secondary and tertiary pages that stem from those menu items.

How are content items organized into similar groupings? Does this make it easier to navigate the website? Are there any pages that seem to be missing or out of place?

Finally, evaluate the site and its use of the genre conventions listed above. See if you can find an example of each genre convention and explain how you think this

Blogs

While blogs are often housed as part of a larger website and utilize similar genre conventions, they are listed here as a separate genre because their rhetorical function is a little different. For most organizations, the purpose of a blog is to further develop their brand with the target audience, strengthen their credibility in a particular area of expertise, solidify connections with readers through meaningful content, and increase traffic to their website (Cardenas). One of the genre conventions listed above for a website is to keep the content "fresh." However, this might be difficult to do on the larger website since the overall mission and service offerings aren't likely to change very often. Posting blog articles every week or so is a great strategy for keeping the content fresh, offering readers new and relevant information, and getting people to come back again and again to your website, where they are more likely to not only read the article but also follow your call to action at the end to get more information, share your blog post with others, or buy a product.

Before we get into the genre conventions of a blog post, let's talk about niche. All successful blogs have a particular niche or an area of focus (Connell). It helps build their brand as an expert in a particular field or topic, and it keeps readers in the target audience, who are also interested in learning about that particular topic, engaged. For instance, there are quite a few travel bloggers on various platforms who write about their experiences in various travel destinations, providing travel tips and an overview of things

to do and see. Their "niche" is travel, which means that if they suddenly began posting about DIY projects around the house or gardening tips, their audience would be confused. Their brand as a travel expert would be weakened by messaging that doesn't relate. This is a mistake that many novice bloggers make—trying to write about a lot of different things, which makes their blog somewhat eclectic and scattered. It might do a good job demonstrating their own interests and experiences, which might engage that person's immediate family and friends, but it won't be as effective in attracting other followers.

Obviously, whatever niche you pick should relate directly to your brand—either your individual brand if you are developing your own website and blog or your organizational brand. A hardware store, for instance, might develop a blog around DIY projects and home repairs, which is a way of developing expertise in that area and showcasing the products they have available for those jobs. Readers get useful information about how to do these types of projects, and they are more likely to visit the store to get individualized advice or buy specific tools. Similarly, a daycare might focus on a blog about childhood development and best practices for engaging with different age groups. A university might write a blog about student success, with topics related to academics, financial aid, housing, and so on. A local yoga studio might write a blog about different yoga techniques, benefits, basic exercises, and underlying principles, which would be of great interest to people who are interested in trying yoga. It provides them with useful content and it positions the yoga studio as an expert in this area who is genuinely interested in helping people be successful.

While it's important to have a focused niche, you also want your topic selection to be broad enough that there are lots of new and interesting things to write about in that area. That way, you can easily post a new blog article every week or so. All of the examples above could be developed into very robust and dynamic blogs because there is so much room to write about various topics. The university blog about student success, for instance, is a very

flexible niche. Blog articles could be about time management, how to decode a syllabus, how to schedule classes, how to understand graduation requirements, how to effectively study for an exam, how to get a meaningful internship, and on and on. Specific article topics in that larger niche would be never-ending and provide lots of meaningful information for current students, prospective students, and parents, who would develop a deeper connection with the university as they continue to engage with the blog. As you are considering your own niche, a good test would be to see whether you can come up with 10–15 article ideas within that niche. If you can't, it might be a sign that your niche is too narrow and that you need to expand it a little more. For example, student success is a lot more broad of a niche than study skills. DIY is a much broader niche than window replacement. It might take some time to land on the right niche that is narrow enough to build your brand and yet broad enough that there are lots of things you could write about.

Once the overall niche is established, there are several standard genre conventions that most blog posts follow, which, once again, are directly related to the primary goal of engaging readers and persuading them to take some sort of action. Every genre convention is rhetorical in the fact that it influences the way that a reader will respond to the message. Some important genre conventions for a blog article include the following:

- **Stay focused.** A blog article should clearly relate back to the niche you've established and it should stay focused on the topic that it advertises in the title and the introduction. While blogs come in varying lengths, some as short as 300 words and others as long as 2,000 words, they should stay focused on the topic at hand and avoid unnecessary tangents. While longer blogs might spend more time developing background information or elaborating on each subpoint, everything should clearly work together to develop one main idea that you think will be of value to your target audience.
- **Chunk your content.** While staying focused on one key idea,

it's also useful for readers if blog articles are broken down into subsections with clear headings that make it easy to follow along with the structure of the article. For instance, a blog article about the cognitive benefits of yoga might begin with a brief hook about the obvious physical benefits of yoga and then transition into the little-known fact that it also benefits cognition. It might then have a section that defines "What Is Cognition," followed by subsections that identify some of the main cognitive benefits: "Improved Memory," "Better Focus," "Enhanced Problem-Solving." Each of these headings would help categorize different parts of the article so that it's easier to follow. Each section might then have three to five short paragraphs focused on that particular subtopic.

- **Be concise.** Once again, you want to be concise with your writing. Keep paragraphs short with two to four sentences each. Use bullets when appropriate. Use simple sentence structures, and find ways to eliminate unnecessary words and phrases. Certainly, it might happen that you need to add words to your blog post to hit your desired word count (as blog articles should generally be consistent from one post to the next), but that doesn't mean filling up the article with "fluff." Instead, you'd add examples, statistics, or descriptions that add meaning and keep readers interested.

- **Have an engaging, specific title.** Blog titles engage readers because they are clear about the value proposition—the thing that readers will gain from reading the article. For instance, an article titled "Ten Best Travel Destinations on the East Coast" or "Reduce Your Debt in Three Easy Steps" are both very specific titles that tell readers exactly what the articles are about and how readers will benefit from reading them. This, in turn, is more likely to attract readers than titles that are vague or obscure.

- **Use hyperlinks.** Your blog article should be well researched and be transparent about where your information came from. Yes, you are building your own brand as an expert in a

particular area, but it also greatly enhances your own credibility when you are able to link to other credible sources that support your ideas. The key word here is "credible," meaning that you might connect to a recent study, a reputable organization, another well-known expert, a recent new article, and so on. You wouldn't link to content that is old or where it is difficult to identify who the author is. You'd also avoid websites with a clear financial motive or bias. You might also avoid linking to a competing blog or company website that might steal readers' focus. Hyperlinks can also be used internally as a way to link readers to relevant information on the website or previous blog articles about a particular topic. You'd want to be sparing with this to avoid too much self-promotion and writing that comes across as disingenuous, but a couple of internal links here and there could be useful to further engage readers.

- **Write in a friendly, conversational tone.** Blogs are generally less formal than the content of an organization's website, which gives you the freedom to be more conversational. This is a great way to engage readers and build a rapport. If done well, it can also help develop your brand in particular ways. Generally speaking, a more conversational tone is more accessible. You'd avoid jargon and long-winded complex sentences that might otherwise come across as pretentious. You'd also have the opportunity to use language that's a little more lighthearted and fun. However, you'd still want to maintain a level of professionalism, maintaining a focus on the main idea of the article and providing relevant information and hyperlinks to supporting information. Depending on the context, you might also want to avoid first person, which is completely appropriate for a personal blog but would come across as confusing and a little too informal for an organization's blog.

- **Post pictures and other visuals.** Once again, pictures that are relevant to the content provided can be a great way of engaging readers and deepening their level of understanding.

Charts, tables, and other graphics can also be a great way to break up written text.

- **Proofread.** Yes, a blog is more informal, but that doesn't mean you can relax your standards for correct grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Proofreading errors can be incredibly distracting, making it difficult to understand a text and diminishing the credibility of the author. Do your due diligence and proofread carefully.
- **Update often.** While other parts of a website tend to be more static, meaning they aren't updated very often, a blog is meant to be dynamic with new content added consistently. Be sure to date your blog posts and provide new content every couple of weeks. This is crucial to reader engagement as well as other communication goals related to branding, increased traffic to your website, and the overall customer journey.
- **End with a CTA.** Remember that a lot of digital messaging ends with a call to action, explicitly directing readers to the next steps they should take and providing a clear path to take that action, usually in the form of a hyperlink. Many companies have boilerplate information that goes at the bottom of a blog article, meaning that it's repeated word-for-word every time, perhaps reminding readers of their overall mission, the ways that they can help customers with specific tasks, and directing them to resources where they can find more information and get in touch with an associate.

Social Media Posts

You're probably familiar with the ways that individuals use social media platforms to post personal updates and photos, documenting important events or finding ways to connect with a larger group of family members and friends. While chapter 2 in this textbook dives into the positive and negative effects of social media usage

from a personal perspective, this section focuses more on the genre conventions of social media posts from a professional perspective. Not surprisingly, the majority of businesses both large and small use social media as a key aspect of their marketing strategy because it's a quick and inexpensive way to engage with customers, and it leverages algorithms and user-driven data to provide targeted marketing to the people who are most likely to be interested in their products and services (Turner). Also, as the LinkedIn article by Josh Turner confirms, the advantages go both ways. Customers also benefit from the ability to quickly connect with a business, and it affords a platform for them to share useful content and reviews with their own followers.

One reason that social media marketing is so popular is because it's an incredibly effective way to reach people in the target audience with updates and engaging content that will (ideally) drive them to the website. Thus, companies are very intentional about their social media presence, selecting platforms where their target audience is likely to be and planning out content that will effectively grab their attention. Since there are literally hundreds of social media platforms, it doesn't make sense that an organization would have an account on every single one. Instead, they'd do some research into the target market to find out which social media sites are most popular (Dean) and how certain demographics tend to use which platforms (Barnhart). For instance, a yoga studio would probably be most interested in targeting women in their thirties and forties, so they would focus on the social media platforms that women in their target market use.

Another key aspect of social media marketing is consistency. Some businesses post on social media every day in order to continuously engage with new and existing customers. However, they need meaningful content to post. That's why many organizations create a social media calendar where they plan out the content they will post for the next month, often to promote upcoming events or report on recent organizational news (Kenan). However, to fill in the gaps in between events, many organizations

will utilize [content buckets](#), where they consider the different types of content they want to feature each month (Chickering). For instance, one bucket might be employee profiles, another bucket could be customer testimonials, and yet another bucket could be product highlights or an expert tip of some kind. However many buckets there are, content would be created so that a certain number of posts go into each bucket and then are placed on the monthly calendar to ensure that there are a variety of posts with unique content from one day to the next.

Finally, social media posts must be appropriate for the specific platform. For instance, LinkedIn is a social media platform geared toward professional advancement, highlighting career opportunities and professional development, so it wouldn't be an appropriate place to highlight the latest yoga technique. The same goes for platforms like Tinder or Flixster. The content of your post should match the overall theme of the platform. Similarly, you'd want to match the specific genre conventions of a specific platform. There are far too many to list out here, so some general guidelines are listed below. Before posting on a social media platform you aren't familiar with, you should get a clear sense of the types of the format that is most appropriate. X and Facebook, for instance, are more conducive to text-based posts, while Instagram is focused more on photos. YouTube is obviously geared toward videos. While you want your message to stand out to your target audience in a positive way, creating messaging that isn't appropriate for a given platform will likely create confusion and weaken your credibility.

Specific platforms aside, there are some best practices for social media posts that span across all platforms:

- **Be concise.** Yes, this is a theme across all digital writing, but it's especially true for social media platforms where readers tend to continuously scroll through their feed. You want to catch their attention right away and make it easy for them to quickly get the main idea of your post—probably in a sentence or two. X is a good example of a platform that limits the

amount of characters you can use for each post, pushing users to be as succinct as possible. Other platforms don't impose those limits, but they do collapse longer posts so that users have to click "read more" to see the entire post. Often readers don't, and if they do, they will quickly move on if they are confronted with a wall of text.

- **Use hashtags.** You probably don't want to overdo it with 7 to 10 hashtags, but having two or three hashtags (indicated by the # symbol) is a great way to connect the content of your post to other groups and to spread your message to larger audiences. Most platforms have a way for you to research popular hashtags for given topics so that you can use them appropriately.
- **Title your post.** Individual social media posts don't usually have a title, but professional posts often do because it focuses readers' attention and provides the same value proposition that a blog title does.
- **Use appealing images.** Readers are more likely to read your post if you engage their interest with a picture. For instance, a travel agency that posts an ad about "Affordable Beach Bungalows" would probably garner a lot more interest if they featured tropical pictures of happy vacationers lounging on their own bungalows. Some posts also use short videos and influencer testimonials to grab people's attention.
- **Give full URLs.** Unless you have a button at the bottom of the post (which is often a good idea), social media platforms don't use hyperlinks. If you want to link to a website, you have to give the full URL.
- **Give a call to action.** Once again, social media posts often give a call to action for people to learn more, which often links to a website or email address.
- **Be engaged.** As people in your audience engage with your post, commenting on the content, asking questions, giving reviews, then you should occasionally respond. You might not be able to respond to every single comment, but your presence will

create a positive impression that you are genuinely interested in connecting with people. You might also receive more likes and followers if you are intentional about making connections with other people and organizations that are in your community or that are somehow complementary to your organization. They, in turn, would be more compelled to follow, like, and share your social media posts.

Do a little bit of research about a company and its digital marketing efforts. This could be the same company that you selected for the website activity above or it could be something different, but it should be an organization that has a large enough digital media presence that it has a blog as well as social media accounts on a couple of different platforms. It might also be a company that you receive emails (or text messages) from, so you get a larger sense of this company's content strategy.

What strikes you about the consistency across these digital messages? In what ways are they similar or obviously working toward similar purposes? How do they link to one another? What makes each piece distinct? And how do specific genre conventions aid in reader engagement and readability.

Now create another piece of collateral messaging for this company—perhaps a social media post or an email about an upcoming event or sale. You could also consider additional topics for the company's blog and maybe even outline one.

> Do your best to fit in with the established brand of this organization and to follow the genre conventions outlined above.

A Final Note about Genre

Of course, this chapter didn't cover every digital writing genre. There are simply too many to cover. What's more, the idea of genre gets even more complex when you consider the countless genres in specialized fields. For instance, while there are some basic principles that hold true for all websites, there are also different types of websites that have their own set of conventions. A university website, for instance, is substantially different from that of a restaurant, local charity, or used car dealership. A university would obviously post pictures of campus life, give details about the application process, and post specialized information about different majors and graduation requirements. When you look across a bunch of different university websites, you'll see that most of them are organized in very similar ways and that they use very similar language to explain these concepts. Another example might be fitness blogs or churches' Facebook posts. These too will be unique, having particular qualities that are unique that that more narrowed genre.

The point is that if you are confronted with a genre that you aren't familiar with—as will probably happen at some point—then you can easily gather information from other examples in that genre and evaluate which elements seem to define it. What types of content are typical? What about graphic elements? Tone of voice? Design elements? Organizational structures? Once you understand

the concept of genre, then you can evaluate new forms of writing and apply those genre conventions with confidence.

Discussion Questions

1. What is a genre? What is the purpose of identifying standard elements of a particular genre? How do you think understanding genre can help you become a better writer?
2. Define a genre convention and give some examples from a genre of your choosing. How do specific conventions aid the reader's experience and facilitate larger rhetorical goals?
3. What does it mean to say that a genre convention serves a social function?
4. What are the major rhetorical functions of a website? Give examples to show how specific elements on a typical website work toward these larger goals.
5. Identify the primary genre conventions for a website. Which ones were you already familiar with? Which ones are new or perhaps less obvious?
6. What does it mean that a blog writer usually develops a niche? How does this relate to things like branding and audience engagement?
7. Why is social media marketing so popular for many businesses? What are some content strategies that help keep audiences engaged?
8. Name some of the genre conventions that are consistent across different forms of digital writing.

Which ones are unique to genres such as emails, blog posts, and social media posts?

9.   How can you apply the concept of genre conventions in order to learn to write effectively in new genres as they emerge?

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14. Basic Design Principles

An important concept in the world of digital writing is the user experience (UX), which the [Nielsen Norman Group](#) defines as "all aspects of the end user's interaction with the company, its services, and its products" (Norman and Nielsen). This is obviously a broad area that extends beyond content writing. It includes things like market research, product design, price structures, customer service, and even the larger organizational structure in place to optimize workflow and attend to specific customer needs. However, as we've discussed in previous chapters, the user experience usually *begins* online when someone in the target market first lands on the organization's website. There are lots of things that have attracted them to the site—a social media ad, a flier they received the mail, a meta description on their search engine results page (SERP). Whatever it might have been, it sparked an interest, probably related to some sort of problem or desire that this person wants to address. And as we've also discussed previously, once they are on the website, it takes only a few seconds for them to judge whether or not the potential reward is worth their effort. (See System 1 and System 2 discussion in chapter 12). And while this snap decision happens quickly, it's actually a pretty nuanced decision-making process based on a number of visual cues—colors, pictures, navigation menu, page layout and readability, and so on. Several design elements come together to create an impression in the user's mind about the company itself, about how relevant their offerings are to the user's needs, and about how easy or difficult it will be to get the information they are looking for.

All of this relates to design—how things are organized to enhance the user experience and create a positive impression, which in turn increases their chances of staying on the page longer, navigating through other pages of the website, and progressing through the various stages of the customer journey. (Hopefully, you

are making the connection back to our unit on rhetoric: purpose, audience, message.) Not every person who lands on a web page will fit into the target audience, primarily because the service, product, or experience being offered doesn't match their needs; but for those who *are* in the target audience, engaging their attention is directly related to rhetorical strategy. Yes, this is about word choice and organization of written content, but it's also so much more. In fact, the concept of "design" could be taken a couple of different ways. On the one hand, web design encompasses the organizational structure and functionality of a website—how pages are organized in similar groupings on the navigation menu, how easy it is to navigate from one page to the next, how hyperlinks and buttons are used to direct users to specific information. It also relates to the usability of the website so that pages load quickly and so that structures are in place to aid users in specific tasks, whether that be filling out a form or making a purchase. Effective web design makes these processes intuitive for users and provides useful feedback along the way, maybe to show what they have in their shopping cart or to generate a receipt and tracking number for their purchase. Obviously, this type of web design is complex, and it extends outside the scope of this textbook on digital writing; nevertheless, it's an important topic that directly relates to the overall success of a website. Content writers and web designers often work very closely together to create effective messaging, and it's helpful for writers to have a sense of this bigger picture. This [web design guide from Adobe](#) (Babich) is a good place to start, as is this [LinkedIn article by Andy Crestodina](#).

On the other hand, design can also include visual elements and page layout. While this is certainly relevant to the aesthetics of a page, these design considerations go beyond the simple purpose of making something look good. When done well, the visual design of a page adds to the readability of the content, creates emotional connections with the audience, builds trust, and has a significant impact on the user experience. Consider the difference between a simple web page with black font on a white background and a page

that has color, bold headings, pictures, buttons, and graphics. Even if the written content were exactly the same, users would be much more likely to engage with the page that has more dynamic design elements because it's more interesting and readable, and it comes across as more professional.

This chapter focuses on these visual elements of design that enhance digital writing and facilitate a more positive user experience. In particular, we will look at principles of design that should guide some of your choices when it comes to the overall layout of a page and the way specific visual elements work together to focus the user's attention and hold their interest. The goal is to be able to apply these principles to your digital writing projects, ranging from the simple structure of an email or social media post to something more advanced like a blog or web page.

Learning Objectives

- Understand how design choices influence the user experience.
- Relate the concept of page design to foundational concepts of rhetoric.
- Identify the foundational principles of web design and be able to apply them effectively across a number of digital genres.
- Consider the importance of page design from the user perspective, considering how certain design strategies will help them process information and easily navigate a web page.
- Understand the basics of several other prominent design theories, including Gestalt design principles,

color theory, and typography.
- Take a closer look at design considerations and strategies that are unique to digital writing.

From Content Strategy to Page Design

As always, it's important to keep in mind two critical aspects of your message as you begin designing the layout: your audience and your purpose. These two things should be at the forefront of your mind as you make design choices. Specifically, what do you want your audience to know after reading this page? What do you want them to do? A successful designer will think carefully about these rhetorical purposes and use basic design principles to engage the audience's attention, to draw their eyes to certain parts of the page, and to create a sense of order and direction that helps the reader process the information and follow the steps you've outlined for them. In this section, we'll look at the fundamental principles of design and the different ways they might be applied to a web page, blog post, or social media ad. Then in the next sections, we'll drill down to consider some of the design strategies that are particular to digital writing.

Page Structure

Often the first design decision relates to the bigger picture of the overall page structure—which different elements (or *modes*, if you think back to our chapter on multimodality) will be placed on the

page and where they will go. While the layout of a page is partially about aesthetics and creating a positive first impression, it's also about usability. Your job is to direct the reader's attention to the most important items on the page and help guide their process for taking in information and responding appropriately to key prompts. Remember that design principles are based on the user experience—how people perceive the meaning of a message based on the selection and arrangement of design elements. In this [Elementor blog post](), Alina Khazanova reminds us that design principles are based on research in the areas of psychology and behavioral science (among others), which provide insight into the cognitive process of a user and the design strategies that will increase their likelihood of engaging with your message. With that in mind, there are several design principles that should inform the way that you structure elements on a page:

- **Limit the amount of information on the page.** Too much information becomes overwhelming for readers and limits their ability to respond appropriately. Think about the key purpose of the page, and highlight the most important information related to that purpose. If there are several pieces of information on the page, then consider how they might be "chunked" together to help readers more easily process the information.
- **Emphasize the most important information.** This goes hand in hand with the principle of visual hierarchy, discussed below. It's important to draw readers' attention to key ideas and action items. Readers are more likely to pay attention to things that are higher up on the page, bigger, and set apart from other information through spacing or color contrast.
- **Stick with what readers know.** Khazanova suggests using "familiar scenarios and logic" that will make a page more intuitive for readers, who are used to certain page structures and design elements. This allows them to focus less on trying to understand how your web page works and more on the

information you've provided. For instance, most users would expect the navigation menu to be at the top of the page and to be the same from one page to the next. They'd expect appropriate spacing and sizing of information, so it's easy to tell how things are connected. They'd expect the call to action to be prominent and clearly stated.

- **Create a page that has balance.** According to Steven Bradley in this *Smashing Magazine* article, "Balancing a composition involves arranging both positive elements and negative space [white space] in such a way that no one area of the design overwhelms other areas." The elements work together to create a page that is visually pleasing and "stable." While some items on the page might have more "weight" because of their size and visual appeal, a balanced page arranges elements on the page so that, if there were a vertical line down the center of the page, both sides have equal weight, perhaps with several smaller elements on one side to balance a larger element on the other side. Bradley's article gives examples of both symmetrical and asymmetrical balance, along with some examples.
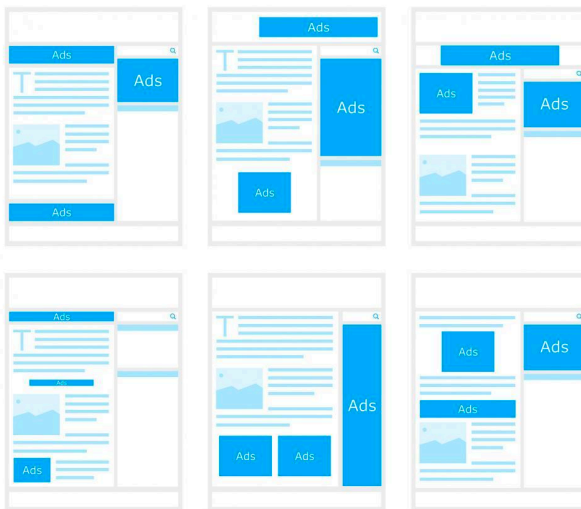
Ad layouts, by JuralMin, on Freerange under Equalicense.

Designers use several different techniques to plan out the overall layout of a page. For instance, [Paul Boag](#) says that all websites operate on a grid system, with evenly spaced columns and rows. This grid system helps with the alignment of items on the page, which helps with balance and makes it easy to plan your layout. Similarly, designers also use [wireframes](#) to plan out the elements on the page (Technology Transformation Services). This typically uses boxes (to represent images) and dummy text to plan the placement of various elements on the page and to get an overall impression of the layout before you invest time in putting it together.

For some examples of different types of page layouts, take another look at Paul Boag's article on [WebsiteSetup.org](#). It not only provides layout options, but it explains how the different options fit with different types of content and purposes.

Visual Hierarchy

The visual hierarchy and overall structure of a design go hand in hand. While an effective page structure creates visual appeal and makes the information easier to navigate, visual hierarchy directs readers' attention to the most important elements on the page, often because of their placement as well as their size. This is why article titles are at the top of the page and the font is much bigger, often set off in bold, colored lettering. Readers will see it first, and it helps frame their perception of everything else on the page. Another thing that will draw readers' attention to specific elements is contrast—setting an item apart visually using color and negative space. For instance, call-to-action buttons are often set apart from the rest of the text so they are easier to see, often using a button icon in black or some other bright color that stands out against the background.

Setting up a page with a clear visual hierarchy also

improves readability because it guides readers through the content, providing cues for what to pay attention to first, second, and so forth, which improves their ability to quickly scan the page. Once again, having a visual hierarchy that draws on familiar patterns will help readers more quickly move through the information. Babich identifies the F-shaped pattern and the Z-shaped pattern as two very common ways to organize information on a page that fits with readers' "natural scanning patterns."

Visual Hierarchy, by Cara Miller (CC BY)

Grouping Similar Items

Several of the Gestalt principles of design relate to the way people will naturally group items together based on visual cues, which once again helps them understand how items relate to each other and engage with the content of a page more quickly. Let's look at some

of those principles and how they affect the reader's perception of content:

- **Proximity.** According to the Gestalt principle of proximity, readers will naturally group items together if they are close to each other. Take, for instance, a photo caption, which is usually placed directly underneath the photo, close enough to it so that readers will naturally perceive it as being connected with the photo.
- **Common region.** Similar to proximity, the principle of common region is about the way that items are grouped together because of the way they are set apart in a particular area—often in an enclosed box or with a background that is a different color than the rest of the page. The navigation menu for most websites is usually at the top, and the items are set apart in a different background color. Also many web pages are set up so that as users scroll, they can quickly identify different content areas, which are set apart with different background colors.
- **Similarity.** Finally, items will be perceived as similar if they have similar design features, perhaps with the same border, color scheme, and font. They would also be the same size so that readers perceive them as having equal weight.

An example of how similar items might be grouped together might be helpful. The USA.gov home page uses all of the elements discussed above to make it immediately clear to readers how items relate to one another. The navigation menu at the top is set apart in a white background, separated from the banner graphic below. And because each of the menu items is close together and in the same basic black font, it's clear right away what their purpose is and how they relate to one another. Similarly, as you scroll down the page, different content items are grouped together, and they are easy to spot because of the background shading (the white box with "How do I..." for instance). Also, items within each grouping use

similar design elements, using the same font style and size as well as color choices. The content section below, for instance, uses three pictures that are all the same size, evenly spaced, and directly below the text that describes what each link is about. This, in tandem with the "Life Events" heading that would naturally draw readers' attention first, helps readers to clearly see the relationship between the photos, which underscore the different ways the organization helps the community.
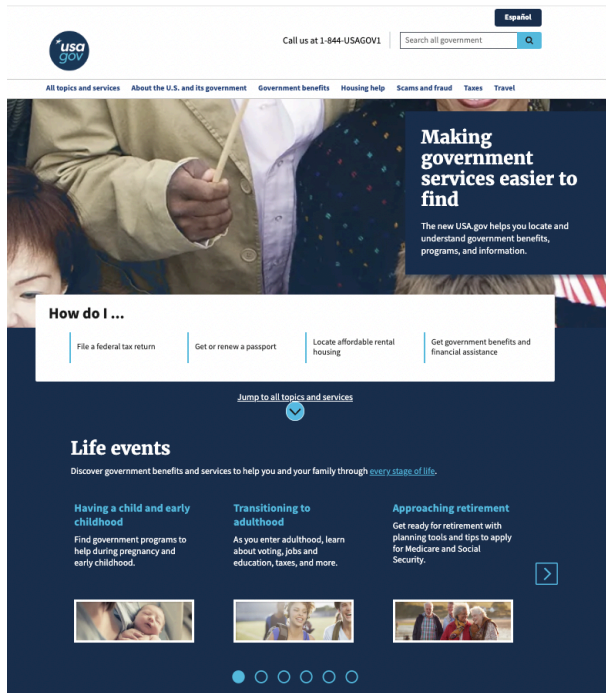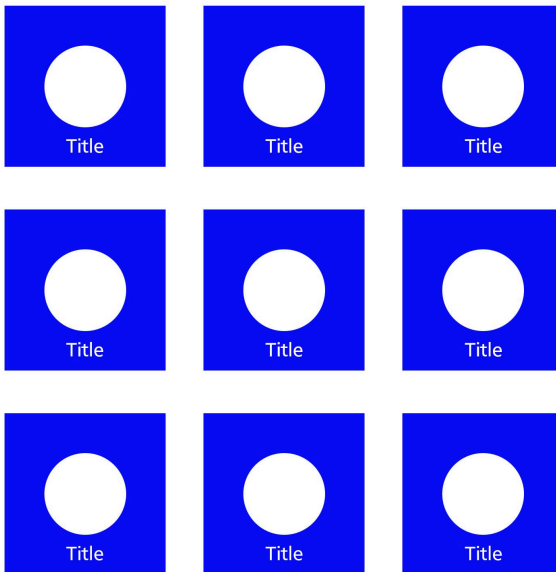
Consistency

Many of the design principles we've already discussed relate to consistency (also known as *repetition*) so that readers know what to expect and can easily read and interpret the content provided. This

relates to a lot of different choices, from organizational structure to smaller design considerations like color, spacing, and font. Perhaps the best way to think about the importance of consistency is to imagine a page that isn't consistent—that uses different font shapes and sizes and lots of different colors throughout. Not only would it be unattractive and difficult to determine what to look at first, but it would be harder to understand the relationship between elements, as discussed above, because the similar features that connect elements would be missing. Consistency also relates to the branding of an organization. The website should be strategically designed using a color scheme and design patterns that align with the overall image the organization is trying to create, and using these same structures consistently within a page and from one page to the next helps develop that brand. Below are a few specific ways to develop consistency:

- **Page structure and organization.** As discussed above, you can create consistency by utilizing organizational patterns that readers are already familiar with, which will make your site more intuitive for users. Once you've decided on a structure, then you'd try to be consistent with that structure throughout. For instance, the navigation menu should be the same from one page to the next. If you have a blog with different articles, each article would be laid out in similar patterns.
- **Color scheme.** Often the color scheme is consistent with other branding elements like the logo and other marketing materials so that everything looks like it goes together. Color is also an important element that can evoke readers' emotional responses, so it should be used appropriately to build the brand. A kids' laser tag facility would obviously use bright, electric colors to create a feeling of excitement in the audience. In contrast, a funeral home would obviously use more subtle, soft colors.
- **Font.** Because readers group similar items together based on design choices, it's important to be consistent with font—page

titles, headings, second-level headings. These would probably all be the same font style and color. Headings of equal importance would be the same font size with the same amount of spacing between.

- **Other design elements.** Whatever treatment you give to one element, you should apply it to all similar elements. If, for instance, one of your call-to-action buttons is a black rectangle with sharp corners, they should all look like that so they are easier to spot. If one callout box has a drop shadow, they should all have drop shadows.

Consistency, by Cara Miller (**)

While not everything on every page has to be exactly the same (see below about variety), creating consistency between key elements makes the overall design seem more unified, and it creates a more even and intuitive experience for the user.

Variety

An effective design uses a variety of design elements to engage readers as well as to clarify information. Chapter 10 in this textbook discussed multimodal messages and the power that various modes—images, text, color, video, sound—have to help clarify and enhance the meaning of a message. For that reason, and because it's more visually appealing and interesting, you should think about how to use a variety of elements to draw readers' attention.

Importantly, you can still be consistent while drawing on a variety of design elements. Take color, for instance: a web page would be boring and more difficult to read if it were just one color throughout. However, if you use the same two or three colors consistently—across various types of texts and content areas—then you have a variety of colors that direct readers' attention without being overwhelming. Another way to use variety is through imagery, breaking up text blocks with photos and other graphics elements (icons, pie charts, tables, cartoons) that are relevant to the overall message and that help inform the readers' interpretation of the message.

Once again, it's important not to go overboard. When too many things are happening on a page, it's overwhelming for readers. Nothing is emphasized because there are too many elements to look at. Being strategic about the elements that should go on a page and how to utilize variety with a couple of different modes of communication will go a long way.

Quality

It should probably go without saying that the elements that you do include on a page should be high quality, creating a professional look and feel. This relates to all of the design principles we've

discussed up to this point, but here let's focus specifically on pictures and videos. A quality photo, for instance, is one that is in focus and is a high enough resolution so that it isn't pixelated or blurry. It has a clear focal point with the image positioned appropriately, so that it fits comfortably into the frame. There wouldn't be anything in the foreground or in the background that would create a distraction. If you've taken very many candid photos, you know that this is easier said than done. We often take photos that are slightly out of focus or where the lighting is off, so there isn't a good view of a person's face. Fortunately, there are photo editing tools that can help with some of these issues, but it's better to start with a high-quality image. The main point is to only include the best photos on your website or digital design.

The same thing can be said for videos, which are an increasingly common way to engage visitors either on a website or through social media. Videos can be an excellent tool because they provide clear visuals that can help viewers see a particular process, event, or product. They can also create emotional connections as viewers see people's faces and hear their voices. However, there's a lot that goes into creating an effective video that reduces background noise, that creates interesting and dynamic scenes, that avoids "dead air" or transitions that are too slow as well as camera movements that are too fast or wobbly, that uses effective voice overs and sound effects, that has the appropriate lighting, that effectively integrates text and other visual elements, and so on. Once again, video editing tools have evolved significantly in the last few years, which makes it possible for anyone to enhance the quality of the videos they put online. There are also plenty of YouTube videos—for video editing as well as photo editing techniques.

Activity 14.1

Let's put some of the design principles listed above into action. Review the [FedEx home page](#)—or any other website of your choosing. You should go through the design principles listed above and consider how they are applied on the page. Which ones strike you as being the most effective in both engaging readers (both visually and emotionally) and helping them easily navigate the information on the page.

Now reverse engineer the page by creating your own wireframe of the page structure. You can do this with a pencil and paper and really basic boxes and text blocks to represent the various elements.

Now consider how the page might have been structured differently. Create a new wireframe that organizes the elements in a different way. Consider how you could utilize some of the other design principles listed above to engage readers in this new page design.

Other Design Theories

While this chapter isn't intended to be an exhaustive resource on visual design, it would probably be helpful to at least mention some of the other design theories that could be useful in your decision-making process as you put together the visual elements of a web page, blog post, or digital ad. The principles listed above are the most basic and also the most foundational design principles that can be immediately applied to your digital writing and design projects. This section will mention other prominent design theories that may provide a deeper understanding of the audience perception and

some of the nuances in your design choices that can have a significant impact.

Gestalt Design Principles

Many of the principles identified above draw from Gestalt psychology, which is the study of how people perceive design elements on a page to create meaning (Encyclopedia Britannica). Gestalt theory looks at the entire layout of a design and considers the way that elements work together to create meaning. Thus, elements aren't viewed in "isolation" but as contributors toward the entire message. There are seven classic Gestalt principles, some of which we've already mentioned (ManyPixels), but they are listed briefly again here so they can be viewed all together:

- **Similarity.** As already discussed, the principle of similarity helps readers group items together that have similar features. However, it can be used to make certain items stand apart from the group in some way.
- **Good figure of simplicity.** Viewers will always reduce a complex design to its simplest form because it's easier to process. The ManyPixels blog uses the example of the Olympics logo, which most people will perceive as five overlapping circles as opposed to something more complex. This relates directly to the principles discussed above about limiting the amount of information and visual elements on the page. Simpler designs are much easier for readers to process and to remember.
- **Proximity.** Viewers are more likely to group items together when they are near each other. This is a good way to demonstrate a relationship between these elements and also to make other elements—spaced further away—stand out.
- **Continuity.** Our minds have the tendency to connect items if

they follow the same line or curve. According to this principle, simply lining information up in a line from left to right or top to bottom, sometimes using actual lines or arrows to connect them, will help readers group items together and sequence how they process information.

- **Closure.** For shapes and images that are disconnected in some way, viewers will automatically fill in the gaps so they can perceive the entire image. A classic example is a circle that is formed along a dotted line. Despite the fact that it isn't a closed circle, a viewer will automatically close the gaps to see the circle shape, instead of seeing a smattering of random dots.
- **Figure/ground.** When looking at a picture or other page layout, we will immediately try to discern what is in the foreground (the figure or focal point of the picture) and what is in the background. Obviously, the more important items that you want viewers to pay attention to should be in the foreground, contrasted in some way from the background.
- **Common fate.** This principle states that people will tend to group items together that seem to be moving in or pointing in the same direction. A simple example might be italicized text that is all pointing in the same direction. We'd be more likely to see that text as connected together because of the common angle of the font.
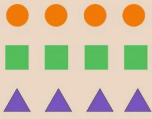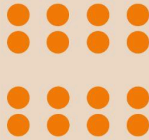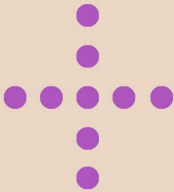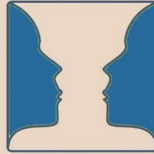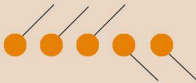
Color Theory

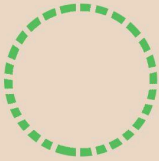There are lots of different ways to talk about color and the effect it can have on the audience. For starters, there is a difference between hue (what we normally think of as the color of something—e.g., green or blue) and other visual qualities, such as shade (light or dark) and saturation (how pale or bright the color appears). Obviously, colors that are more vibrant—a brighter, more saturated color—will have more visual weight and be more likely to draw the viewer's attention.

Color theory also relates to the emotions that different colors evoke in the audience. You probably already know that there are "warmer" colors like red, orange, and yellow and "cooler" colors like blue, purple, and green. These colors can be used strategically to enhance a message or the overall tone of a design. Similarly, different colors are often associated with [different meanings](#) (Bowman). Red is often associated with love, anger, or warmth. Yellow is often connected with happiness and excitement. And so forth. Color choice can have a significant impact on how a message is interpreted and the feelings that the audience associates with that message.

Finally, color theory focuses on the ways that [colors work together](#) to create an overall visual impression or experience (Interaction Design Foundation). The only way that one element would be emphasized using color is if other items were de-emphasized with contrasting colors that were less vibrant. There are also the dynamics of how different color combinations pair together to create complementary (opposing) or analogous (similar) effects. The main goal is to use a consistent color palette that has a variety of colors that work well together and to use color strategically throughout the design to create emphasis. As always, color choice is one key element in a much larger strategy to convey a particular message, build your brand, engage viewers, and evoke particular responses.

Typography

As the name suggests, the study of typography relates to the way that text is designed so that a message is both readable and interesting. While the [particulars of typography](#)—the different classifications of fonts and the different parts of a letter—can be quite detailed and specific (Bowers), here we will focus on the primary considerations of typography, assuming that you will be making font selections instead of creating your own.

The main consideration when it comes to typography is readability. Obviously, the text comprises an important part of the overall message, and you want readers to be able to easily read it, from the largest headings and titles down to the smaller text blocks. There are a few basic strategies that will make the font easier to read:

- **Size.** Obviously, the bigger the font, the easier it is to read. As previously mentioned, your titles and headings will be larger than some of the other text blocks and will therefore naturally pull readers' attention, but they should also be able to read the "smaller" print of an article or web page. A good rule of thumb for digital writing is to use 11-point font or larger. Of course, the size will vary depending on the context. If the text is going on a digital screen in an area where readers will be reading it from a distance, the font size will be significantly larger.
- **Font choice.** As we'll discuss below, different fonts have different personalities that might enhance the emotional quality of your message, so it's probably okay to play around with different font styles for titles and ad copy where only a few words are selected and the font is relatively large. However, for larger blocks of text that require more sustained readability, it's much better to stick with a standard sans serif font, meaning that it doesn't have additional strokes and projections at the ends of a letter. For example, look at the two

F's below. The one on the left is in a sans serif font, and the one on the right is in a serif font.

F   F

As you can see, the serif font on the right has extra marks at the base and at the ends. While this might create a more formal look, it is harder to read, particularly for large text blocks in a smaller font. And obviously, the more pronounced and ornate the serfs become, utilizing lots of different swirls and other elements, the more difficult it would be to read.

- **Contrast.** The final consideration with readability is about contrast, so that the lettering is set apart from the background enough so that it is easy to read. One of the biggest mistakes novice designers make is to use a font color that doesn't have enough contrast with the background—a light gray font on a white background, for instance, or red font on a black background. There has to be enough contrast so that the text easily stands out. You'd especially want to keep this in mind for text that goes over the top of an image. Once again, without the right contrast, it can be extremely difficult to read the text over an image. That's why many designers use the negative space of a picture, create drop shadows around the text, or use text boxes—all of which can be used to increase the contrast so that the text stands out.

The other consideration with typography is about the overall emotional quality personality of various font styles and how

they might be used to enhance your message. Again, readability is key, so you wouldn't use different font treatments for larger chunks of text, but for a title or a short line of ad copy, a unique font can have a significant effect on the audience's interpretation. It might help if you first consider the overall purpose and tone of the message, the impression that you are trying to create in the mind of the reader, and that will likely guide your font choices. Is the tone of the message serious? In that case, it might make sense to go with a more traditional sans serif font. Are you trying to demonstrate the elegance of a particular product or event? In that case, a more formal script font like Edwardian would be more appropriate. On the other hand, if you want to invite a bunch of children to a kid's birthday party, then you'd want a font that seems playful and fun—Curlz, for instance. While there are lots of different fonts to choose from that might create the right impression in your audience, there are definitely fonts that would be the wrong choice. Consider, for instance, a wedding invitation that is created in Curlz font. Instead of sending the message that the event would be formal and sophisticated, the invitation would probably create some confusion and maybe even some anxiety about what to expect.

Activity 14.2

Consider the list of messages below. What type of font do you think would be most appropriate for each one? Give an example for each one:

- Job résumé
- Yard sale sign
- Graduation open house
- Funeral bulletin

- Ad for a neighborhood block party
- Public service announcement about suicide awareness
- Course syllabus
- Divorce papers
- "Closeout" sale
- Feel free to come up with your own

Special Considerations for Digital Design

As you put together designs that will be viewed on digital devices, there are a few special considerations that enhance usability:

- **File sizes.** We've already discussed the fact that you should only use quality images and videos to engage viewers, but the other side of that is that higher-resolution images and high-quality videos are usually really big files that take up precious storage space and often result in longer loading times, which can quickly frustrate impatient users. Fortunately, web graphics don't need to be as high-resolution as print graphics (72 dpi compared to 300 dpi), which means the files will be significantly smaller. Further, saving the file as a .jpg or .png results in a smaller file than a .tif or a .psd file. For videos, there are online applications you can use to compress video files into something smaller. Alternatively, you might consider uploading video files to YouTube and then embedding the video link on your website, which means that the video will still play on your web page, but the video itself isn't housed there.
- **Cascading style sheets.** With so many WYSIWYG (What You

See Is What You Get) platforms, it's no longer necessary for you to know how to code a website in HTML to create one. Cascading style sheets describe a way of coding the elements on a web page so that they are consistent across different pages—so that the title of each page, for instance, has the same font style, font size, color choice, and spacing. Most web platforms have these types of choices built in so that you can make selections that will be consistent across different pages of your website without having to know the HTML code. Utilizing these options will help you more easily create consistency and unity.

- **Hyperlinks and buttons.** Here's where your design choices can leverage concepts that your audience is familiar with, and since your hyperlinks and buttons usually accompany your call to action—inviting readers to take some sort of step toward your desired goal—it's important that they recognize these elements. It's pretty simple, really. A hyperlink is usually in blue font, underlined. This is the universal signal that the text is a hyperlink to a relevant page, and following this convention will make it much more likely that readers will recognize the hyperlink and click it. Usually, pages are structured so that internal links open in the same screen, whereas external links will open up a new window, making it possible for readers to return to the original page. In that case, it's helpful to set up your hyperlinks so that they change colors once they have been clicked (maybe from blue to purple) so that readers can visually see where they've already been. Similarly, buttons are more often used as the overall call to action—to "read more," to "apply now," to "subscribe," and so on. While some of the more subtle style choices might vary, it would be to your benefit to make your buttons look similar—not only from one page to the next but also in comparison to other websites.
- **Mobile responsiveness.** A mobile-responsive website is one that reformats for maximum readability and usability depending on the user's device (Constant Contact). So instead

of displaying the same, shrunken-down version of the home page on your cell phone, the overall format changes so that key items are bigger and formatted vertically, so it's easier to scroll through and click on the items that you want. This is helpful not only when going from a laptop to a cell phone but also when switching from one screen size to the next or one type of browser to the next. It ensures that the items are reformatted appropriately. Once again, many web platforms are mobile responsive and make it possible for you to toggle back and forth between multiple views as you put a page together.

- **Testing.** One great thing about digital design is that it's relatively easy to change. Content strategists and web developers are constantly "testing" the effectiveness of their pages, not just through form feedback but also through various metrics that show how long viewers stayed on a specific page, how many people clicked on the CTA, and so on. Playing around with different versions and monitoring the results lets you gauge how your design choices are landing with your audience and to make improvements along the way.

There is a lot to consider when it comes to the design of your digital projects, and sometimes having so many options can be overwhelming. The good news is that there are lots of online resources that you can draw from as well as successful (and unsuccessful) websites where you can draw inspiration and remind yourself of various pitfalls.

Discussion Questions

1.   What is the user experience (UX) and how does the

overall "design" of a website influence the user experience? Consider the different types of "design" discussed in the introduction.

2.   How does the design of a message relate to rhetoric? Be specific about how it relates to some of the terms we've already discussed: purpose, audience, genre, persuasive appeals, and so on.

3.   The design principles identified in this chapter are based on research in the area of psychology and behavioral sciences that look closely at how people process and respond to information. Explain this reciprocal relationship between audience perspective and design.

4.   The chapter lists six foundational principles of web design. Identify each one, and give a brief overview of what each one means and how it might be applied.

5.   What is a wireframe and how might it be used to help you plan your design?

6.   Many of the foundational web design principles identified near the beginning of the chapter overlap in some ways. For instance, the principles of page structure and visual hierarchy both relate to the arrangement of elements on the page and strategies to emphasize important ideas. What other ideas overlap across some of the design strategies discussed in this chapter?

7.   Explain how a digital design can have *both* variety and consistency.

8.   What are the Gestalt design principles? How do they relate to some of the principles discussed in the first part of the chapter?

9.   In what ways do the sections on color theory and

typography build on the design principles already discussed?

10.   Explain some of the special design considerations that are unique to digital writing. Can you think of any others that aren't specifically mentioned in the chapter?

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15. Branding, Content Strategy, and SEO

While many of us might take the Google search bar for granted each day, search engines are remarkable tools that make the internet functional. Researchers estimate that there are nearly [2 billion websites](#) currently online (Djuraskovic), with somewhere between [30 and 50 billion individual web pages](#) indexed through Google (Georgiev). Perhaps even more mind-blowing is the rate of increase. Remember that the World Wide Web was launched in 1991, just over 30 years ago, and as web publishing tools have become more accessible, an increasing number of websites are created each year. In the last 8 years (since 2015), the number of websites has doubled. [Siteefy.com](#) estimates that 252,000 new websites are created each day, which equates to 10,500 new sites each hour (Huss).

It's amazing that so much information exists on this thing called the internet and that anyone can access it from almost anywhere using a device that fits in their pocket. And perhaps even more amazing than that is the ability to quickly—often with very little effort—type in a couple of terms into the search bar and be connected immediately with the information that you are looking for. Out of the 50 billion web pages that exist in Google's database, it finds pages that are (usually) relevant to your search and presents them in a search engine results page (SERP) that is easy to peruse, increasing your chances of landing on the exact right page that fits your query. The topics are limitless—daily news stories, historical documents, product reviews, travel tips, studies in academic journals, healthcare information, and so on. According to the latest statistics from [Oberlo](#), Google responds to more than 99,000 search queries per second, adding up to 8.5 billion searches each day. That doesn't include queries on [other search engines](#), such as Bing, Yahoo, and Baidu (Broadband Search).

The point is that the content on any given web page is only valuable if people can access it. In chapter 13, we discussed the primary importance of an organization's website, which is at the center of its communication strategy and houses key information about the mission, products and services, and daily operations of the company. In many cases, a customer can complete the entire buyer journey—from start to finish—online without ever setting foot inside the store. However, the entire process hinges on the customer's ability to find the company's website, so that when they identify their need and put in search terms to find a viable solution, they are connected with relevant resources and can quickly and easily discern that a particular website will provide the best solution. This is what it means to be "optimized." In general, this term means that something is working at top efficiency so that it's as effective and useful as possible. In the world of website design and digital writing, it means that the website is developed using strategies that not only enhance the user experience when they are on the website but also help them *find* the website in the first place. A web page with effective SEO (search engine optimization) makes it easier for Google (and other search engines) to find, index, and rank the page. The better the SEO, the easier it is for Google to distinguish how relevant the page is to a particular search and the higher that page will rank on the SERP. This is the most effective way to draw traffic to a website. In fact, compared to pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, the "organic" search results that emerge through effective SEO are approximately [20 times more likely to bring traffic to a website](#) (Moz).

This chapter focuses on the fundamentals of SEO and how to effectively integrate it into a website to increase traffic and audience engagement. First, we'll briefly review larger concepts of content strategy, branding, and digital orchestration so that you can see how SEO fits into this bigger picture. We'll then look more closely at how search engines work, the benefits of SEO, and the specific strategies for incorporating effective, ethical SEO into a website.

- Understand what SEO is and how it relates to the success of your digital content.
- Consider how SEO fits into larger branding and content strategies.
- Learn how search engines work to provide users with relevant results.
- Be able to create a list of relevant and useful keywords based on audience needs and search patterns.
- Learn how to successfully implement keywords on a web page in order to strengthen SEO and improve page rankings.
- Learn about other important SEO strategies, including featured snippets, internal links, backlinks, and SEO analytics.
- Understand the difference between white hat, black hat, and gray hat SEO and how they relate to the user experience and the overall credibility of your website.

The Connection between Content Strategy and SEO

It's important to contextualize SEO in the context of an organization's larger brand and content strategy. Otherwise, it's

easy to focus on keywords and lose sight of your larger goals, which are largely about building connections with an audience and helping them solve problems. Yes, a large part of content strategy is about traffic—bringing people to your page. But remember that you're not focused on getting just anybody to your content. Effective content strategy is grounded in market research and careful planning that targets specific types of people who are most likely to be interested in the information you are providing. And once these people in your target audience are on your page, your larger content strategy helps them quickly and easily find the information they are looking for while also creating a positive impression of your organization and your overall mission.

In other words, SEO is an important tool that can create awareness, extend the reach of your messaging, and intrigue people in your target audience to learn more, but it's only successful if it aligns with a larger content strategy that focuses on the needs of your audience. Julie McCoy writes that effective SEO drives "profitable traffic" and "high-quality inbound leads," which demonstrates that not all leads are equal. A high-quality lead is someone who *wants* the product, service, or information that you are offering because it solves a problem or fulfills some sort of desire. Yes, content marketing is often about "nudging" people along to create new needs and desires they didn't know they had, but ideally, there are already people in the world who have identified a need, and if they only knew about your product or service or experience and how it would satisfy that need, they would be eager to engage with your website. McCoy goes on to say, "To provide meaningful and useful information, you need to understand who your prospects are and what they need from you. This insight guides you in creating content with a purpose."

It's no wonder, then, that one of the first steps McCoy recommends for effective SEO is to identify and seek to understand your target audience. What are their needs? How would they define the problem they are experiencing? What types of things do they prioritize as they consider viable solutions to their problem? What

are some of their other values, experiences, affordances, and challenges that would drive their decision-making process? You might recall that many of these questions relate directly to the section on audience research and personas that we discussed in chapter 9, and it's a crucial aspect of content strategy because it guides all of your other decisions about what type of content to write and which channels to use.

More specifically, understanding the target audience and developing a content strategy that prioritizes their needs (as opposed to your own ranking) provides several important advantages:

- **Useful content.** You'll not only get a better understanding of the search terms that your target audience might use but also the intent behind those terms—the type of information they are looking for, which will direct the type of information that you put on your website and provide direction for blog content.
- **Engaging content.** Audience research helps you understand more nuanced preferences about the best format for your content (e.g., a blog article, a video, an infographic, etc.) as well as the overall tone and design considerations that are most likely to engage their attention.
- **Stronger branding.** With a better understanding of audience expectations and values, you can highlight stories and aspects of your mission that build trust and emotional connection. What's more, as you develop useful content that audiences want to share, more backlinks will naturally direct audiences to your content, and your reputation as an authority in a particular area will grow (Lyons).
- **A higher ranking.** Too many people try to "trick" the system to receive a higher ranking, but the real secret—the thing that Google prioritizes in its algorithms that index and rank web pages—is relevance (Sharma). The more useful it is to the audience, the higher it will rank on the SERP.

- **Effective digital orchestration.** Audience awareness helps your digital orchestration because you have a better sense of which platforms your target audience uses and the types of content that would be most compelling.
- **More conversions.** In the end, better digital orchestration and content strategy means that more people in the target audience will visit your website and persist through the buyer journey, whether that means buying a product, making a donation, volunteering for an event, or simply bookmarking your page as an important resource.

How a Search Engine Works

Before we get into the particulars of SEO strategy, it might be helpful to have a better understanding of how search engines work to find and sort relevant content. According to [Google](#), this process happens automatically as web pages are added, but there are definitely key strategies that make it easier for [Googlebot](#) to access and correctly index content (Google, "Search Engine Optimization"; Google, "Googlebot"). Since Google is by far the most dominant search engine, capturing [90% of all searches](#) worldwide (Broadband Search), we'll focus on its process, which involves [three basic steps](#) ("In-Depth Guide"):

1. **Crawling.** Googlebot is programmed to constantly send out "spiders" that locate new and updated web pages so they can be added to the list. These spiders "fetch" pages by following the links on existing pages and then following the links on those new pages and so forth, which adds to billions of web pages that have been identified. Most of the time, you *want* Google to crawl your pages so they can be added to the index, so you'll want to [eliminate any potential obstacles](#), including broken links, multiple URLs that point to the same content,

content that requires a password, and network or server issues (Google, "Optimize"). You can also block spiders from crawling certain pages that you don't want to be indexed—an internal human resources page, for instance—which eliminates unnecessary crawling and prevents people from accessing pages you don't want them to see (Google, "How Google Interprets").

2. **Indexing.** As the name implies, this is the process of discerning what a particular page is about so the page can be accessed later on in response to a relevant query. This includes the content on the page that is visible to users—the titles, subheadings, and other written content. It also includes meta descriptions, content tags, and alt descriptions that can be used to label videos and pictures. Pages are more likely to be indexed if the content is easy to discern, if the content is meaningful and reliable for potential users, and if the page seems to be functional with working links and information that loads quickly.

3. **Providing search results.** This is where ranking comes into play. When a person does a Google search, Google tries to match the keywords from the search to the pages it has indexed in order to find the content that is the most relevant. The more relevant and high quality the content, the higher it will rank on the search engine results page. Although the precise algorithm Google uses to sort and rank pages is a trade secret (DeMers), the goal is to provide a positive user experience by providing meaningful content, which is why pages that don't seem relevant or that are clearly trying to work the system with unintelligible keyword stuffing won't show up in the ranking. Google says, "Relevancy is determined by hundreds of factors, which could include information such as the user's location, language, and device (desktop or phone). For example, searching for 'bicycle repair shops' would show different results to a user in Paris than it would to a user in Hong Kong" ("In-Depth Guide").

The goal of SEO is to improve a page's ranking so that it appears higher up on the list of relevant pages and has a better chance of being seen by interested users. In fact, the number one organic result on a SERP (organic meaning it's not one of the "sponsored" sites at the very top) has a [much higher click-through rate](#) (up to 10 times higher) than pages on down the list, and very few users (.67%) visit the second page of the results list (Dea). Think of the thousands of potential web pages that are probably relevant to a given query. Though a lot of quality pages exist with the types of content people are looking for, they have relatively low traffic to their site (and probably lower sales and weaker brand recognition) because their website isn't optimized.

Here it's probably helpful to remind you that Google's algorithms aren't neutral, and many people argue that they aren't really about providing users with the most useful or quality information. "The internet has a reputation as a democratic space, yet the commercial interests that influence what we can find online are largely invisible," said Dr. Helen Kara in a [review](#) of Safiya Umoja Noble's book *Algorithms of Oppression.* In other words, Google is not as much of an information company as it is an advertising company, and even beyond the sponsored sites, Google privileges content that serves its own financial interests. That's not to say that there isn't value in optimizing your website so that your messaging is clear and easy for users to find. It's simply a reminder that even in the most basic digital writing tasks—utilizing keywords, for instance—take on new meaning when you apply a critical perspective, which can help guide your writing strategies and expectations. The remainder of this chapter will focus on how to incorporate SEO into a web page to improve its ranking and overall visibility.

Creating Keywords

At its core, SEO is about identifying the keywords that the target

audience will use when they search for information and then using those keywords throughout your web content so that the page is properly indexed and ranks high on the SERP for queries that use those keywords. As we've already mentioned, this is largely about understanding your audience—their needs, values, priorities, and potential obstacles—so that you can provide meaningful content that will engage their interest. But it's also about understanding people's search habits, which can be difficult to figure out. Most people type in a couple of words or a short phrase into the search bar, and Google tries to figure out their search intent—the type of content they are looking for (Backlinko, "Search Intent"). For instance, if a person types "ice cream" in the search bar, it might be hard to decipher what type of information they are looking for. Local ice cream shops? Recipes? Brands? Ingredients? Does the intent also include yogurt? What about soft serve ice cream? And what if the person spells the word wrong—"ice creem"? Google tries to resolve some of these issues using language models that fix spelling errors and include a variety of synonyms (Google, "How Results"). It also analyzes the search terms that are given and suggests ways that users might narrow their search. If a person types in "ice cream recipes," for instance, they'd get a different list of results than if they had typed "ice cream stores." You might also notice that as you begin to type in search terms, Google provides suggestions for popular queries. If you begin a search with "ice cream" for instance, Google offers suggestions to help narrow the search: "near me," "cake," "maker," "flavors." And then once you complete your query and review the results page, Google will often offer a list of alternative phrases that "people also search for" to help guide your search (Dakner).

As you can see, identifying a user's intent is crucial. "Satisfying search intent is a primary goal for Google, which in turn makes it a primary goal for SEO's," says Dawn Macri, who goes on to explain that search intent should be the foundation that guides content that is specific and responds to the needs of different people at different stages of the marketing funnel: "From

those who are still to discover your brand to those looking to convert, you can increase your chances of reaching them all by focusing your efforts to match search intent" (Macri). There are four broad categories of search intent:

- **Informational:** Searchers are looking for basic information about a term, a process, an event, and so on. They might include the terms "how to" or "what is" in addition to the general topic. For instance: "What is SEO" or "How to build a website." Other searches may be about "the history of" a particular topic or "the main ingredients in" a specific food or "the effects of" a particular phenomenon. Thinking clearly about how people might qualify their search can help content writers implement a variety of keywords that match.
- **Commercial:** Searchers are looking for a particular product or service, and they're beginning the search to weigh their purchase options. In that case, they might search for specific brand names, but they might also search more broadly for the "top rated" or the "best" or the "most popular" or the "most affordable" options. They might also provide geographical qualifications to specify a particular city or that they are looking for stores "near me."
- **Transactional:** Users have done the research and are ready to make a purchase, usually from a particular company or brand. An example might be "Air Jordan basketball shoes" or "Scott's lawn service." Search terms might also include specific types of information the user wants to find related to a "subscription," "pricing," "package options," or "making an appointment." You can probably see how specific pages on a website, clearly identified in the navigation menu and as part of the URL, can utilize these keywords.
- **Navigational:** Searchers are looking for a specific website, but because they don't have the URL, they type the name of the website into the search bar to help them navigate to the right page. Perhaps they are looking for the "login" page or the

"home page," or they might remember the title of the page.

Understanding these different types of search intents and the specific words users might use to qualify their search can be incredibly helpful in identifying relevant keywords. These are called "long-tail keywords," which are more specific to the user's intent and are less competitive than "short-tail keywords," which are very broad (Yadegar). While short-tail keywords are usually just one or two broad terms that are very popular and relate to a much higher search volume ("ice cream," for instance), they are also more generic and are therefore much less likely to match the user's intent. Long-tail keywords are longer, including more specific qualifiers that are more likely to match intent. Though they have a lower search volume, meaning they aren't as popular, they have a higher click-through rate.
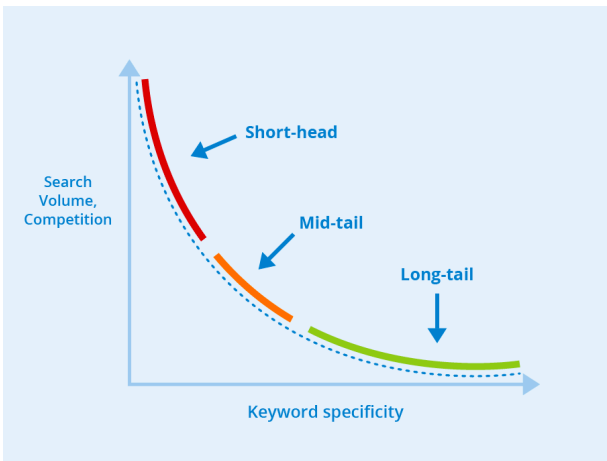
Long Tail Keywords, by Seobility (CC BY-SA 4.0)

In addition to understanding user intent and how that might help you develop keywords, there are several other important strategies:

- **Create content categories relevant to your site.** Here you'd

identify the different types of information that your website offers and then come up with a list of keywords for each one. A local sporting goods store, for instance, might offer several different content categories on its website: clothing, shoes, equipment, equipment repair services. For each category, then, they would come up with a list of relevant keywords. The shoes category might include keywords such as "women's running shoes," "women's athletic shoes," "arch support," "durable athletic shoes," and so on.

- **Research related keywords.** When you put some of your keywords into the Google search bar, what other keywords does it suggest to qualify your search? What types of keywords and phrases are used at the very bottom of the search engine results page? These keywords can also be added to your list and help you think creatively about other possibilities.
- **Use a keyword research tool.** Some popular tools include Moz Keyword Explorer, Google Keyword Planner, Google Trends, AnswerThePublic, and SpyFu Keyword Research Tool. These allow you type in a keyword, and they will provide a list of popular related keywords.

Of course, not all keywords are equal. Once you've generated your list of keywords, you might want to go through and prioritize strong keywords that have the most relevance to your content, that relate directly to your authority in a given field, and that are popular enough to improve your rankings. Matt Secrist suggests having three to eight keywords for a web page. The above tools can be very helpful in identifying the search volume of a particular keyword. If the volume is too high (indicating that it's too competitive) or too low (indicating that people aren't using that specific keyword), then you might want to eliminate it from your list. Google Trends can also be helpful to show the history of specific search terms and to provide future projections so your keywords align with search trends.

Implementing Keywords to Improve SEO

When you have your list of keywords, the obvious next step is to implement them in the content, which should be fairly easy, since the keywords were created to reflect the main ideas of the content. There are several ways to implement keywords effectively into your content to improve SEO:

- **The body of the article.** The article itself should include your primary keywords, but keep in mind that the text should still be reader-focused (not search-engine focused), which means that it should be meaningful content that flows logically and naturally. Some experts believe that Google and other search engines prioritize the first 200 words in an article or web page, since the introduction typically sets up what the page will be about (Clay). In that case, it's important to use your primary keywords right away—within the first couple of sentences. From there, keywords should be sprinkled throughout the rest

of the article. Secrist suggests using your primary keywords (the ones that are most relevant to your content) "once every 100 or 150 words" so that they are distributed fairly equally throughout and keep the focus on those main words. Secondary keywords should be included throughout also, but not more frequently than the primary keywords. Finally, the closing 200 words should also include the keywords to create a final impression and set up the call to action.

- **The article title.** Using the primary keywords or a close variation of them will also help improve SEO. It's also helpful for readers to have a title that clearly identifies what the article or web page is about. Titles that are too obscure or vague are less likely to attract readers.

- **Article headings and subheadings.** Since [longer articles](#) (around 1,000–2,000 words) tend to rank higher in the SERP (Secrist), you'll likely have some pages with multiple "chunks" that help break up the content and guide readers. Using keywords in the headings and subheadings is helpful for readers as well as rankings.

- **Image alt text.** Remember that images—photos, charts, tables, and other graphics—make your page more visually appealing and can help reinforce and clarify some of the main ideas in the text. So your page should have images, and you should take the time to label each picture using relevant keywords. This label is known as alt text. [HubSpot](#) explains that alt tags "appear in place of an image on a webpage if the image fails to load on a user's screen. This text helps screen-reading tools describe images to visually impaired readers and allows search engines to better crawl and rank your website" (Becker). Most content management systems give you the option to create alt tags for your images.

- **SEO title tag.** Also known as the meta title tag, this is the title that appears on the SERP. It is a clickable link that takes users right to the page, so it should be clear and utilize your primary keyword.

- **Meta description.** This is a description of what the page is about that is displayed directly under the meta title on the SERP. It should provide meaningful information and also utilize your primary keywords at least once but not more than twice so that it doesn't seem like you are keyword stuffing.
- **The URL.** Create meaningful URLs that utilize the keywords to identify what the page is about. This is also much easier for people to remember later, as opposed to a long nonsensical string of characters.
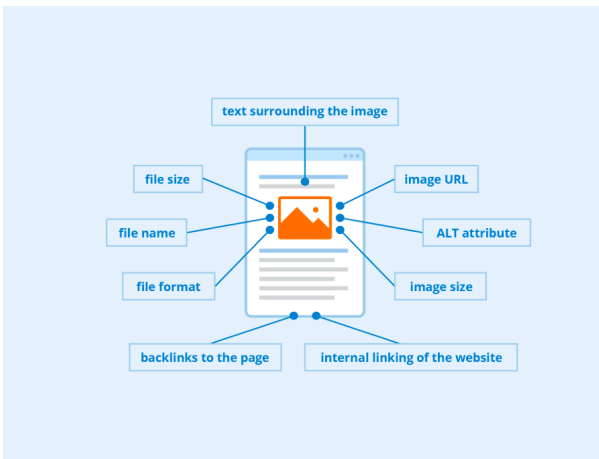
Image SEO, by Seobility ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

Activity 15.2

Find an example of a web page that uses keywords effectively in all of the places identified above. Start by identifying a question or keyword phrase and doing a

Google search. Select one of the top organic search results and review the web page to see how and where the keywords you used in your search are used throughout the page. Now compare this web page with another one further down on the list, perhaps on the second or third results page. Is there a difference between the way the two pages use keywords? Why do you think the second page is ranked so much lower than the first?

Other Considerations

In addition to utilizing keywords effectively throughout your content, there are a few other important strategies that will improve your page ranking and its visual appeal on the SERP.

- **Creating content for a featured snippet.** A featured snippet shows up on the SERP, just below the featured ads at the very top, and it captures text from a particular web page that Google believes will immediately answer the search query (Smarty). This is obviously a very prominent position on the page, which makes it likely to catch the user's attention and increases the click-through rate for that page (Gorham). These snippets can appear in different formats: as a short paragraph, as an itemized list, or as a table. Featured snippets can also include photos as well as videos. To get an idea of the type of content that would be most helpful, consider what types of questions (relevant to your content) users are likely to ask and then provide the answer in a direct, clear way, using long-tail keywords and short sentences (no more than 50 words). Using

headings, sectioning off the content with bullet or spacing, and providing quality photos and videos can also increase your chances of being featured. [Backlinko](#) also suggests doing a Google search for your primary keywords and then reviewing the type of information that is currently provided as a featured snippet, so you can get an idea of the type of information and the format that Google is looking for ("Featured Snippets").

- **Building internal links.** Internal links direct readers to different pages on the same website, which can help them navigate your site and find the information they are looking for and keep them engaged on your site for longer periods of time. Internal links are also helpful for SEO because they help Google crawl and index all of the pages on your site. [Google](#) emphasizes the importance of writing clear "anchor text," which includes the words and phrases that are visible in a hyperlink ("Search Engine Optimization"). Anchor text should provide a clear idea of what the linked content is about, perhaps using your primary keyword for that page. While an internal link isn't nearly as effective as a backlink (discussed below) in elevating your page ranking, it does help to enhance the credibility of your content, especially if a page that already has credibility links to the new content. However, you'd probably want to avoid adding too many internal links because it might come across as self-serving and it "dilutes their value" ([Southern](#)).

- **Building backlinks.** The more quality, credible pages that link to your content, the higher it will rank. As opposed to internal links that point to pages on the same website, a backlink comes from another website, often directing readers to a helpful resource. According to Backlinko, "Backlinks are still the best way to determine the quality of a web page," which is why it's such an important metric in Google's ranking system. The more authority that a page has (indicated by its own Google ranking), the more that it helps establish the credibility of the linked content. It also helps if your content is linked

from a site that is authoritative in a content area that is relevant to your own and if it references your site in a positive way. Obviously, the best way to develop backlinks is by providing quality content that people want to link to. Backlinko also notes that certain types of content are especially enticing: graphics, lists, primary research and data, and "in-depth" how-to guides ("Link Building"). The Backlinko guide provides several other helpful strategies for building backlinks, including email marketing, writing guest posts on other sites, providing interviews and original research to the press, and targeting specific types of pages that would be more likely to link to your content.

- **Using SEO Analytics.** SEO analytics uses a number of metrics about how people are interacting with your site in order to help you identify weaknesses and make improvements to your SEO. The most common analytics tool is Google Analytics, which provides data about the number of visitors on a page, visitor demographics, average time on a page, conversion rates, bounce rates, loading speeds, and so on. This type of data allows you to identify patterns of user engagement so you can more clearly see what's working and where your SEO strategy and overall content needs to be improved.

When it comes to SEO, there are some fundamental basics that must be addressed first—Googlebot accessibility and meaningful content—before some of the other strategies like backlinks and snippets can be used to improve a website's ranking. Moz created this "Mozlow's Hierarchy of SEO Needs" to demonstrate this relationship as one SEO strategy builds on the next.

SEO Guidelines: White Hat, Black Hat, and Gray Hat SEO

The main guideline for effective, ethical SEO is to write content with the user in mind, providing meaningful content that helps them solve problems. You'd focus on the aspects of your site that are unique, valuable, and engaging, and you'd put your energy into creating fresh, original content. That is what "white hat" SEO is all about—following the rules and best practices outlined by the search engine for the sake of enhancing the user experience. For instance, Google's SEO guidelines provide best practices for SEO, mirroring many of the things we've already discussed in this chapter about providing clear tags and making sure Googlebot can crawl through your site ("Google Search Essentials").

On the other hand, black hat SEO uses deception and trickery to rank higher on the SERP. It's less about providing meaningful content for users and more about being noticed by search engines. In fact, black hat SEO utilizes strategies that often lead to vague, confusing, and disingenuous content that will repel users and weaken a site's credibility. "These unethical tactics don't solve for the searcher and often end in a penalty from search engines," says Padraig O'Connor with HubSpot. For instance, Google states that websites that are caught using black hat SEO tactics "may rank lower in results or not appear in results at all" ("Spam Policies"). The document on spam policies goes on to list several examples of black hat tactics that may result in penalties:

- **Cloaking**—providing different content to search engines than what is provided for users. The real content is "hidden" to search engines to make it seem more relevant or useful than it is.
- **Doorways**—"website pages created specifically to gain high ranking in a search engine index and to manipulate users. These pages are generally stuffed with some keywords and

phrases and lead to multiple similar pages in search results where each result takes you to the same destination" ([Gordon](#)). Users are often redirected to a different page without their knowledge, or they are tricked into clicking to the next page. For instance, if a company selling birdseed wants to get more traffic to its main page, "The Best Natural Birdseed," then it might create several other "doorway" pages with slightly different words and phrases (such as "Best Birdseed in Indiana," "Best Birdseed in Ohio," and "Best Birdseed for Cardinals") in hopes of drawing different types of people to these separate pages and then redirecting them to the main page.

- **Hidden texts and links**—putting "hidden" content on a page as a way of tricking search engines. Once again, the content might have keywords and other content that seems relevant to a search engine, but the text isn't visible to users, maybe because the text is the same color as the background or the text is positioned off screen. For instance, having a white link on a white background means that it won't show up for readers, but the search engine will see it and rank the page higher because of it. [Google gives other examples](#), such as setting the font size or opacity of the link to 0 or hiding the link behind an image ("Spam Policies").

- **Keyword stuffing**—overusing keywords for the sake of ranking higher on the SERP. "Often these keywords appear in a list or group, unnaturally or out of context" (Google, "Spam Policies"). Once again, Google offers an example, which overuses the keywords "app store credit":

  - "Unlimited app store credit. There are so many sites that claim to offer app store credit for $0 but they're all fake and always mess up with users looking for unlimited app store credits. You can get limitless credits for app store right here on this website. Visit our unlimited app store credit page and get it today!"

- **Link spam**—link-building schemes where backlinks aren't earned but they are manipulated in some way, often paid for or

in exchange for a reciprocal backlink. If, for instance, a realtor wants other businesses, like home inspection or remodeling companies, to link to their realtor website, then they might pay these companies to do so or offer to post reciprocal links to these companies' websites.

- **Misleading functionality**—making users believe that they will be able to access certain content or features though it isn't really available. For instance, a website would have more visitors if it claimed to provide a particular free service (a PDF merge, countdown clock, online dictionary, etc.). It's misleading if visitors follow the link to obtain the service and are instead given more ads.
- **Scraped content**—stealing content from another, more reputable website and using it exactly as is or making only slight modifications. Like it sounds, this is a form of plagiarism as a company literally copies and pastes content from another website, perhaps even a competitor, onto their own page. Even if they change around a few words here and there, it's still plagiarism, and Google notes that this practice often leads to copyright infringement claims ("Spam Policies").
- **Sneaky redirects**—sending users to a different page than the one they wanted. In many cases, a sneaky redirect will make Google think that users are being sent to a page with quality content and useful information while in reality, they are being redirected to a page with ads and spam content. In some cases, users are sent to affiliate websites that provide some sort of commission to the original company for helping them increase their own web traffic.

While these black hat strategies might temporarily make a page rank higher on the SERP, most experts agree that they are harmful in the long run, especially if Google demotes your page or removes it from the results list altogether. This article by Chuck Price in the *Search Engine Journal* provides a few more black hat

strategies as well as information about how to fix them to avoid penalties.

Finally, as the name suggests, gray hat SEO is something in between white hat and black hat SEO. An example might be creating quality content that is meaningful for users but also hiding texts on the same page in order to increase the number of keywords. It's a combination of black and white strategies in hopes of doing both—providing useful content for visitors *and* manipulating the system to achieve a higher ranking. Gray hat tactics are still risky and can come with the same penalties as black hat tactics. The term "gray hat" also implies that there's a bit of a "gray" area between good and bad SEO. What's considered an acceptable SEO strategy one year might be considered unacceptable the next year, so it's important to stay current on the latest guidelines.

As the internet continues to expand and become even more competitive, understanding how to use SEO to reach your target audience and build your brand is crucial to the success of your digital writing content. In fact, the [number of SEO jobs](#) has grown significantly over the past few years, and it can be quite lucrative as a profession (Montti), which demonstrates its growing importance. The most important aspect continues to be the ability to leverage rhetorical skills in order to understand the needs and expectations of an audience and to communicate effectively using a variety of tools. Similarly, critical literacy continues to be a key component of understanding the inherent flaws, limitations, and widespread effects in the algorithms of Google and other search engines and social media platforms. There are ethical consequences to the digital writing choices you make. The goal should always be to provide the best possible content to inform your audience's perspectives, promote social justice, and connect users with the resources they need.

Discussion Questions

1. What does SEO stand for, and why is it such an important consideration for content writers and web developers?
2. How do people's concerns over biased algorithms relate to SEO?
3. How does SEO relate to content strategy? What are some of the key advantages of understanding your target audience and developing content that strives to meet their needs?
4. Why is search intent such an important aspect of identifying effective keywords? What are some aspects of user intent that you'd need to consider? What are the different types of user intent?
5. What is the difference between long-tail and short-tail keywords? Why are long-tail keywords often better? Can you provide some examples?
6. Name some important strategies that will help you create relevant keywords for a web page. How can you prioritize keywords so that you don't have too many?
7. How can SEO analytics help you monitor the performance of your web content and make improvements to your SEO?
8. What is the difference between white hat and black hat SEO? What are some examples of black hat SEO? Why are they considered unethical? Can you name other unethical practices that digital writers often use to manipulate or trick users?
9. What is your opinion of gray hat SEO? Is it unethical? Why or why not? Feel free to explore the "gray" area surrounding this practice and the times when it is ethical versus the times when it's not.

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16. Accessibility and Inclusion

Chances are that you've noticed a common thread throughout most of this textbook: the importance of audience. It's common sense that you'd create content with your audience in mind to capture their attention, guide their understanding, and compel deeper levels of thought and action. However, it's often easier said than done, especially when the audience is unknown. You're not writing a text message to one of your friends, for instance, but you're posting a blog article on your website, and you're not really sure who exactly might read the article. It's also difficult to predict the needs, expectations, and perceptions of people in an audience who are unlike you in some way. You might easily reread and revise content for people whose background, experiences, and identities are similar to your own because you probably have a very similar way of engaging with and interpreting information. But what about people who are a different age, gender, race, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation than you? What about people with disabilities who can't engage with some forms of digital communication the way that other people do? These people are also part of your audience, and it's crucial that you create content with them in mind, prioritizing their needs and experiences so that your content is both accessible and inclusive.

The goal in this chapter is to focus on marginalized identities: minority groups who are often overlooked or devalued in digital content, which not only creates a more negative user experience but limits their ability to have meaningful interactions online or even to complete basic tasks. It also reinforces their marginalized positions. To improve the quality of your digital content for these groups (and for everyone else, too), we'll be focusing on accessibility and inclusion.

The accessibility of your content refers to users' ability to understand and interact with the material provided. The [Bureau of Internet Accessibility](#) defines accessibility as "a set of practices intended to remove barriers for people with disabilities." These disabilities might include physical impairments, such as limited vision or hearing, as well as cognitive limitations. Though more than a [billion people worldwide](#) suffer from some sort of disability (World Health Organization), often affecting their ability to interact meaningfully online, WebAIM reports that [96.8% of home pages aren't compliant](#) with accessibility standards. This includes things like poor color contrast, color usage as the only method of conveying information (on a pie chart for instance), lack of alt text information, lack of captions for videos and audio files—all things that could limit a disabled person from understanding or navigating through digital content.

Similarly, inclusive web content is welcoming to all potential audiences. It's an umbrella term that includes the accessibility of a web page but also takes into account other factors that might cause someone to feel excluded in some way. [Bianca Belman-Adams](#) from Elementor explains, "It is important to keep in mind when designing a website that not every user interacts with it the same way....Inclusive web design removes bias and assumptions from a website so that users won't feel excluded due to an impairment, demographics, or other temporary or permanent circumstances." Assumptions or biases about language, socioeconomic status, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality can all create feelings of exclusion.

This chapter focuses on how to create web content that is accessible and inclusive so that users can engage meaningfully with your content. In both instances, we will consider the experiences of users who are often marginalized from web content, and we'll identify best practices in the design and implementation of your content that will remove these barriers. In the end, developing inclusive content isn't just beneficial to those specific users. It's

good for your brand, and it sends a positive message to all audiences about the importance of equality and social justice.

Learning Objectives

- Understand what it means to make web content accessible to people with disabilities and why this type of accessibility is important.
- Consider the legal, financial, social, and ethical consequences of content that isn't accessible.
- Be able to identify the four principles of accessibility outlined by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.
- Understand basic strategies and some specific techniques to make web content accessible for people with different types of disabilities.
- Understand the broad definition "inclusion" and how it applies to web content.
- Review the elements of DEI as a framework for creating working environments and digital content that is inclusive.
- Understand the difference between marketing to various demographics in a target audience and unintentionally excluding marginalized identities.
- Identify best practices for developing digital content that is inclusive of a variety of identities.

Accessibility

This section of the chapter focuses on accessibility of web content for people with disabilities, who are limited in their ability to understand or use various aspects of a web page. Yes, this includes people with visual or auditory impairments who will struggle to read the text, see the pictures, or hear sounds in a video or audio file, but it also includes people with neurological, cognitive, speech, and physical limitations. The [W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)](#) explains that true accessibility allows people with permanent or temporary disabilities to "perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the web" as well as "contribute to the web" with their own content. Providing tools and accommodations for various situations not only helps people with permanent disabilities but also people with temporary limitations—maybe because they have a broken arm, they are in an environment with a bright glare on the screen, or they don't have their glasses (W3C). Explained that way, it's easy to see how most people would benefit at some point from improved accessibility.

Before we dive into accessibility standards and best practices, let's pause for a moment to consider why this is such an important concept. As stated above, the vast majority of websites don't meet accessibility standards, but there are several fundamental reasons why accessible web content should be a priority:

- **Legal.** Most websites are bound by either the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA.gov) or [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](#) (Department of Justice, "Section 508"). While the ADA is very broad, encompassing a wide variety of public spaces that should be accessible, the law was created to be flexible and to adapt to changing circumstances. Therefore, the internet is considered as a public space that must accommodate the needs of people with disabilities. Violators are subject to

[lawsuits and hefty fines](#) (Userway).

- **Financial.** Obviously, paying a fine or a lawsuit settlement would be expensive, but that doesn't include the loss of revenue from people who aren't able to interact with your content and therefore don't continue through the buyer journey. According to a 2018 report from [American Institutes for Research,](#) people with disabilities have a significant amount of purchasing power and are much more likely to make a purchase when they are provided with a positive user experience.

- **Social.** Being sensitive to the needs of different people can go a long way to strengthen your brand. A website that is accessible, that has taken every measure to ensure a positive experience for people with disabilities, not only makes it *possible* for those people to engage with the content but also cultivates a sense of trust and goodwill so that people *want* to engage. This includes not only people with disabilities but everyone who considers accessibility to be an important issue and appreciates your effort.

- **Ethical.** All of the other reasons aside, providing accessible content is simply the right thing to do. This is especially true following the COVID-19 pandemic, where so many of our basic activities and daily interactions shifted to the digital realm. Recently the [U.S. Department of Justice](#) noted that "people rely on websites like never before for all aspects of daily living," citing examples like voting information, bus schedules, health care information and resources, and so on ("Guidance"). Everyone should have the ability to access the information they need and to contribute in various ways to share their ideas and perspectives.

WCAG Standards

The [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)](#) are the most comprehensive and widely accepted standards of accessibility. It's currently on its third revision with version 2.2 scheduled for completion in May 2023, which builds on existing versions but will enhance "accessibility guidance for three major groups: users with cognitive or learning disabilities, users with low vision, and users with disabilities on mobile devices" (Web Accessibility Initiative, "WCAG 2 Overview"). In essence, as new technologies, trends, and problems emerge, the guidelines are updated so they remain as relevant as possible. Because they are developed collaboratively with constituents in the "global accessibility community" and because they offer broad principles in conjunction with specific techniques and technical applications, the WCAG guidelines are widely used by web designers, content writers, software developers, and marketing professionals. According to Mark Shapiro, president of the Bureau of Internet Accessibility, "Rarely does a single document have such a direct impact on people's lives, but the guidance that WCAG provides allows developers and content creators to include people who have historically been excluded from digital experiences" (qtd. in [Bureau of Internet Accessibility](#)).

The WCAG has four fundamental principles of accessibility, and each one is further developed with guidelines and success criteria, which provides more specific strategies for how each principle can be applied. Each of those principles as well as the guidelines and some of the success criteria are identified below:

- **Perceivable**—content must be provided in such a way that users can perceive what it is. The [W3C Web Accessibility Initiative](#) explains, "This means that users must be able to perceive the information being presented. (It can't be invisible to all of their senses)" ("WCAG 2.1"). Guidelines and [specific strategies](#) for these principles are listed below, taken from the

Web Accessibility Initiative ("How to Meet"):

- *Provide text alternatives for nontext content.* This includes labels and short descriptions for objects, photos, and buttons. It also includes descriptive information for things like diagrams and charts, which wouldn't provide the same information but would give users an idea of what the information is about.
- *Provide captions and other alternatives for multimedia.* Captions are especially important for prerecorded videos and audio content as well as live content. This category also includes sign language alternatives.
- *Create content that can be presented in different ways, including by assistive technologies, without losing meaning.* This relates specifically to the way information is sequenced and the relationships between elements on a page, which can often be done with labels and headings tags, grouping related content, and using standard text formatting conventions.
- *Make it easier for users to see and hear content.* This includes separating the foreground and the background with color and contrast, providing options to pause audio and control the volume, making the font large enough, and providing enough spacing for the text.

- **Operable**—elements on the page must be functional. "This means that users must be able to operate the interface. (The interface cannot require interaction that a user cannot perform)" (Web Accessibility Initiative, "Introduction").

- *Make all functionality available from a keyboard.* In other words, users should be able to perform the same tasks using keyboard commands as they would with a mouse. This includes providing keyboard shortcuts, providing keyboard-triggered handlers, avoiding keyboard traps (in which a user can't move away from an element on the screen), and so on.

◦ *Give users enough time to read and use content.* This includes letting users know if there is a time limit, allowing users to adjust or turn off time limits, allowing content to be paused, getting rid of time limits when it's not an essential part of the content, preventing interruptions, and preventing users from losing data if they do hit the time limit.

◦ *Do not use content that causes seizures or physical reactions.* More specifically, "web pages do not contain anything that flashes more than three times in any one second period, or the flash is below the general flash and red flash thresholds" (W3C). It also includes allowing users to disable animations.

◦ *Help users navigate and find content.* This can be accomplished through page titles and headings, consistent navigation links on each page, labels that identify a logical reading order or tab order, information about the purpose of each link, and providing multiple ways for users to access a web page.

◦ *Make it easier to use inputs other than the keyboard.* W3C explains, "The intent … is to ensure that content can be controlled with a range of pointing devices, abilities, and assistive technologies. Some people cannot perform gestures in a precise manner, or they may use a specialized or adapted input device such as a head pointer, eye-gaze system, or speech-controlled mouse emulator." The specific strategies here allow for different pointing methods, as opposed to only allowing users to drag and drop content, for instance, or to swipe right.

- **Understandable**—"Users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface. (The content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding)" (Web Accessibility Initiative, "Introduction").

   ◦ *Make text readable and understandable.* This includes applying page attributes that identify the default language

used, providing a mechanism for defining unusual idioms and jargon, providing the expanded form of abbreviations, and writing content that isn't more advanced than the lower secondary education level.

- *Make content appear and operate in predictable ways.* For example, new windows and tabs would only open when necessary, users should be able to update settings without changing the context of a page, navigation should be consistent from one page to the next, and similar elements should be identified in similar ways.

- *Help users avoid and correct mistakes.* This includes providing text that helps identify errors on forms, indicating items on a form that are required, identifying the rules for how data must be submitted, providing other clear instructions, and providing suggestions for how to correct input errors.

- **Robust**—Content should be developed so it can be interpreted accurately by a wide variety of users and assistive devices. "This means that users must be able to access the content as technologies advance. (As technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible)" (Web Accessibility Initiative, "Introduction").

  - *Maximize compatibility with current and future user tools.* This includes using markup languages that conform with specified instructions, validating the type of web page it is, using labels appropriately, and using HTML according to relevant specifications.

Obviously, the specific guidelines and strategies can get very technical, often requiring a deeper knowledge of HTML and other principles of web design. The W3C Web Accessibility Initiative provides much more detailed information about practices that they consider "sufficient" (necessary) for accessibility as well as "advisory" (recommended but not required) ("How to Meet"). While you may or may not become familiar with the more technical

aspects of accessibility standards, it's important that digital writers, content strategists, and marketing professionals have a working understanding of the principles as well as the basic guidelines that can easily be incorporated into the design of a web page. Another helpful resource is provided by the U.S. Access Board, which provides guidelines based on Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Activity 16.1

Select a website for a local business, maybe even an academic institution or a business organization that you are a part of. Use the checklist below provided by the Bureau of Internet Accessibility to determine which aspects of the website are compliant and which ones are not ("5 Quick Ways"). The article gives more information about how to check for each item. Write up your own audit report of the site.

1. Check alt text for images and nontext content. You can use a screen reader or other assistive technology on desktop and mobile (Bureau of Internet Accessibility, "Free Accessibility"). You can also right click on an image and select "inspect" to see the HTML code, where you can check for "alt" tags.
2. Check for closed captions and video transcripts. Go to a video and within the player, see if there is a button or option to turn on closed captions (if the captions are open, they'll appear automatically and can't be turned off). Make sure the button works with a mouse and keyboard. Then, identify if there is a text transcript that accompanies the video.

3.   Check color contrast. When we talk about contrast ratios, we're talking about an actual numerical value that identifies the level of contrast. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) success criterion [1.4.3](#) states that normal text must meet a minimum contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 and large text (18 point or larger, or 14 point or larger and bold) must meet a minimum contrast ratio of at least 3:1 (Bureau of Internet Accessibility, "WCAG 2.1-SC 1.4.3"). The [a11y® Color Contrast Accessibility Validator](#) is a free instant color contrast analysis provided by the Bureau of Internet Accessibility ("A11y").

4.   Make sure the site is keyboard friendly. Keyboard testing is something you can try yourself right now. Using common key commands, like the Tab and Shift-Tab keys, you can begin to get a sense of the accessibility condition of your website. If you notice that there are certain elements you can't reach or it's easy to get lost on the page, there might be keyboard-accessibility issues.

5.   Make sure the site can be zoomed without loss of content or functionality. It's a WCAG requirement that content can be zoomed to 200% and still work without assistive technology. Additionally, screen magnification should not interfere with other accessibility requirements. Fortunately, testing for this to some extent can be pretty easy. Zoom your web browser to 200% and see what happens to the content and layout of the web page. Do you notice that content elements overlap or disappear, or do they stack and adjust nicely? Can all the tasks still be performed with both a mouse and keyboard? Do

navigation elements and menus still work well?
Performing this preliminary testing isn't exhaustive or
comprehensive, but it can help you identify some
obvious accessibility issues with the display.

(Text for this activity taken directly from the Bureau of
Internet Accessibility, "[5 Quick Ways to Self-check the
Accessibility of a Website](#)")

Inclusion

In addition to being accessible to people with disabilities, web
content should also be inclusive, providing a space where people
of all different backgrounds and demographics feel welcome.
Obviously, making the website accessible is one very important
step toward that larger goal because it provides very tangible and
specific strategies—color contrast, alt text, closed captioning—that
influence whether or not a person can engage with your content.
Other aspects of inclusion are a little more subtle, pertaining to the
assumptions that are made about the audience, about the kinds of
identities that are "normal" or acceptable. It has to do with the way
that groups of people are portrayed in language and in photos. For
a person to feel welcome on a website, they would see themselves
reflected positively in the content, or they would at least get the
sense that the text was written with a wide range of identities in
mind. This type of content creation can be tricky because it requires
you to identify your own assumptions and biases and to consider
your text from the perspectives of people who are different from
you. It's also just as much about what you *don't* say or the types
of identities that you *don't* feature in the imagery as what you do.

In other words, the inclusivity of a website exists on a spectrum, and the more positive steps you can take in the right direction, in a spirit of openness and humility, the better your content will be for all audiences.

Hopefully it's obvious *why* inclusion is important. In fact, we can point to many of the same reasons that explain why accessibility is important. Similarly, inclusive content has financial, social, and ethical implications, many of them directly benefiting the individual or the organization sponsoring the content as well as the larger community. For the individual organization, the benefits are largely financial. A [2019 article by Adobe](#) reports that 61% of Americans said they find diversity important when it comes to marketing content, and "38% of consumers are more inclined to trust brands that effectively embrace diversity in advertising" (CMO.com Team). On the flip side, the article reports that LGBTQ+, Black, and Gen Z audiences were apt to boycott brands that they felt did not adequately represent their identities. This can have significant financial and social consequences. Just as importantly, efforts toward diversity and inclusion reinforce larger movements focused on equality and social justice. According to [Crownpeak](#), "Diversity, equity, and inclusion matter because they help build a fairer society, strengthening the bonds between people and within organizations. Companies have a responsibility to act against the barriers and historical factors that have caused unfair conditions for underrepresented groups."

As a brief reminder from chapter 5, inclusion is part of a larger framework called DEI, which should guide many of the decisions within an organization, going far beyond the written digital content on a web page to also include things like employment practices, audience research, product development, and so on. It's an entire culture that seeks to include and understand a variety of identities. Let's take a brief look at the elements of DEI:

- **Diversity** is about representing a wide range of identities based on age, race, gender, ability, sexuality, and so on. An

organization that values diversity and a range of different perspectives engages a diverse group of people—as employees, managers, consumer research participants, product testers, and so on. They also strive to include those perspectives as they communicate externally about their brand. [Influencer Marketing Hub](#) says that diversity is the first step because it extends the invitation, making people feel that they are welcome (Molenaar). They are more likely to feel welcome, for instance, if they see positive representations of their identities in an organization's digital messaging.

- **Equity** refers to the actions you take to cultivate an environment of diversity and inclusion, reflected in your policies and daily practices that ensure different groups of people participate and that their perspectives are valued. Equitable practices provide resources and opportunities to groups that have traditionally been marginalized.

- **Inclusion** goes beyond inviting diverse groups of people to be *present*. It encourages them to take an active, important role in the development of ideas. "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance," says Verna Myers, an author and influencer (qtd. in Molenaar). Inviting people to participate might include the way that you invite feedback from various audiences or the way that you use that feedback to improve digital marketing strategies or product development. It's about inviting participation from diverse groups in every aspect of the business process, from product development to customer service and everything in between.

Before we look at specific best practices for inclusive digital content, it might be helpful to distinguish between being exclusive and crafting content for a target audience. As we've discussed all along, identifying your target audience and the characteristics that define that audience is an important aspect of effective communication. For instance, a company that caters specifically to women's athletic gear—shoes, sports bras, running shorts, and

so on would obviously feature women more prominently in their advertising and create content that addresses the concerns and experiences of women. They'd also probably target women in a certain age group, perhaps in a particular income bracket if the clothing is expensive. That company would rely heavily on market research to discover who is in its target market and to create content that those people would find compelling. However, using our same example of a company that sells women's athletic gear, it would be a mistake to exclude (either implicitly or explicitly) certain types of women who *do* fit in the target audience—women of color, women with disabilities, and women with all different body types. These are segments of the target audience that may very well be interested in purchasing workout gear, but because they don't feel fully welcomed on the site perhaps because of language that is used or a lack of diversity in the photos, they aren't likely to engage. Not only that, but their marginalized status is reinforced by their experience on the website.

DEI Best Practices for Digital Writing

Hopefully it's clear that DEI is more than checking off a box on a to-do list or "tacking on" language or pictures that will appease certain groups. It's an entire culture in which inclusivity is fostered at every level of decision-making and management. [Crownpeak](#) also reminds us that DEI should go beyond tokenized representations of minorities during certain times of the year—featuring a Black person on the front page of the website exclusively during Black History Month, for instance: "It's essential to lay the groundwork for year-round DEI with fair and thoughtful representation of underrepresented groups throughout your content—both internally and externally." Many organizations struggle with creating inclusive web content because it requires that, at their core, they establish practices and policies that actually are inclusive. What's more,

people with identities that are more mainstream often feel intimidated by the process of talking through inclusivity issues with other people or by writing text that is sensitive to the many different types of experiences and identities that exist. Fortunately, as discussed by [Ann Gynn](#), the key to writing inclusive content is to have an open mind and to be intentional at every step of the production process to include other voices. She identifies several strategies for making content more inclusive:

- **Be intentional about market research that helps you identify different segments of your target population.** As noted above, this doesn't mean trying to cater to people who are clearly outside of your target population. It does mean that you'd conduct thorough research to get a better sense of who they are: "Look at the available data to understand representations that can be documented such as gender, income level, geography, race, etc. Then go deeper. Ask front-line team members, go to industry events, conduct focus groups in part to better understand those characteristics that are not easily tracked, such as physical ability or point of view" (Gynn). Gynn goes on to suggest that this type of research can be used to create personas of people with different characteristics that can be used to humanize those members of your target audience and help you better understand their needs.
- **Include diverse voices in the content.** Ideally, an organization will prioritize diversity and inclusion at all levels of staffing, so that different identities are represented across various departments and in all decision-making activities. It would also be ideal if content was written by people from a variety of backgrounds in order to better understand and engage with different parts of the audience: "At a minimum, a team should be sensitized and trained to ask tough diversity and inclusion questions and encouraged to consult with those communities where a possible problem or misunderstanding could arise."
- **Use inclusive language.** On one level, inclusive language

relates to a friendly and professional tone, writing that is clear and easy to understand, and a respectful approach to different topics that resists making biased assumptions about what is "normal" or "right." On another level, it's about being sensitive to the way that language is used, demonstrating that you've made an effort to research and effectively incorporate preferred terminology that people won't find offensive. For instance, the 2019 version of the [Associated Press Stylebook](#) added an entire section on race-related topics, identifying language that people of color from various journalism organizations said they preferred (Berendzen). Another great resource is the [Conscious Style Guide](#), which covers a wide variety of sensitive topics and recommends specific terminology (Yin, *Conscious*). The guide's author, [Karen Yin](#), says her mission is to "help writers and editors think critically about using language—including words, portrayals, framing, and representation—to empower instead of limit" ("About").

- **Think about representation.** While it might not be possible to provide representation for every type of identity in your target audience, making an effort to be diverse will go a long way to build trust with your audience. This means using photos that have different types of identities represented in a positive way. It might also mean including testimonials from a variety of different customers or writing employee profiles in order to highlight the diverse voices from your team.
- **Don't overdo it or be inauthentic.** Gynn ends with a warning not to "go overboard" when it comes to being diverse. You don't want to come across as inauthentic or like you are using people's marginalized identities to make yourself look better. You also don't want the content to come across as unnatural, as if you are forcing a message of diversity into a context where it doesn't fit. "Make sure your content reflects a sincere commitment to diversity but in a way that's organic for your brand and your audience" (Gynn).

Have every student in class create a chart with two columns. The first column should include external identifiers that are visible (approximate age, for instance, or height or race). The second column should include internal characteristics that people wouldn't know just by looking—preferences, experiences, hobbies, skills, everyday challenges. Ideally these would be things that might go against the stereotypes people might initially have when they see this person's appearance. Students should go around the room and share their lists.

Next, write a brief reflection about the types of stereotypes you often encounter, particularly in your digital experiences. What do people tend to assume about people with your identity? How do those assumptions and biases affect your personal experiences and decisions online? What would an "inclusive" web page look like for you?

Writing content that is accessible and respectful of all audiences is crucial to effective communication and the success of your brand, but as you can see from this chapter, writing content that is truly inclusive is a complex process and requires a great deal of intentionality, planning, and critical thinking. It also requires both courage and humility. Taking steps toward social justice is always a risk. Not everyone will be on board for different reasons and may choose to disengage from your brand. It's also possible that despite your best efforts at being inclusive, you'll say something wrong or something that is taken the wrong way by someone in your audience. That's where humility comes in—a genuine apology

for the misunderstanding and an effort to better understand that person's perspective so you can address that concern in the future. There's always room to improve your inclusivity efforts and to better understand the people in your target audience if you are willing to listen.

in the acronym.

10.   What is the difference between catering your content to people within the target audience and creating content that is exclusive or offensive?

11.   Identify the best practices of digital writing that create truly inclusive content.

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17. Remix Culture and Copyright

At the time of this writing, [ChatGPT](#) is quickly emerging as a sophisticated AI that can compose complex, seemingly "original" texts and can craft a text to follow the specifics of many types of prompts (Open AI). It can write computer code, short stories, academic essays, songs, cover letters, emails, and much more. Ironically, not only can this new AI be used by students to write academic papers, it can also be used by teachers to grade essays and give detailed feedback, which would lead to a rather sad state of affairs in which nobody, not even writing teachers, is doing the intellectual and creative work of composing original texts. It's easy to see why so many people are concerned about the consequences of such technologies, which allow "writers" to sidestep the cognitive, often emotional and intensely personal, process of putting thoughts and experiences into words—the *right* words. For many of us, it's a labor of love, and the satisfaction of producing a thought-provoking text that can engage the emotions and imagination of an audience is tied up in the inherent struggle of the writing process. It's much more than a reflection of ideas that are already fully formed and simply need to be translated into text. The [writing process is generative](#), where ideas and connections take shape that wouldn't have otherwise (Sayre). In other words, writing facilitates personal growth, critical thinking, and human connections that AI can't replicate—and even if it could, where would that leave us? Much of the reason that copyright exists is to validate human expression and the unique ways that writers and artists go about putting their ideas into words and images.

On the other hand, the word "original" when it comes to creative and academic writing is fairly misleading. Many discussions of the writing process begin with a stage called "[invention](#)," where

writers "discover the ideas upon which their essays will focus" (Vanderbilt University). However, many people argue that true invention is a myth, that people don't create new ideas and connections as much as they discover possibilities that existed all along but hadn't been recognized in quite that same way. Architect [David Galbraith](#) says, "We can only select things that are possible, [*sic*] invention is merely when the possible is new. Real invention, out of nowhere, not selecting from the possible, is impossible, by definition." Then there's the reality that in many instances, there aren't really new ideas as much as there are new ways of applying old ideas—or different ways of combining seemingly disparate ideas to create something new. That's what a remix is. It restructures existing content, making selections and deselections from a variety of texts, to create something new and interesting. It's a lot like cooking. Chefs don't create brand new ingredients; they combine existing ingredients in different ways, sometimes making adjustments to existing cooking processes, in order to create something fresh and interesting. The whole idea behind "fusion" is that classic recipes from different cultures are combined to create new flavors and culinary experiences. The same is true for writers who combine and build upon existing words and ideas. If you really think about it, all of the seemingly "new" ideas that people have emerge from somewhere—something someone else says, a process or experience that triggers an "aha" moment, an existing line of thought that can be retooled, the cultural nuances that influence your way of seeing and thinking about the world. It's impossible to trace those disparate strands that come together at the exact moment a "new" thought enters your mind, but it didn't materialize from nothing. All writing (and thinking) is a remix. According to [Everything Is a Remix](#), "When we create, we often seem alone, but we are in fact together" (Ferguson), referring to the ways that ideas transcend time and space, always setting the stage for and guiding the choices of what comes next.

As you can probably see, there are two opposing ideas at work in this chapter, complicating the very notion of what is an

"original" work. Writers don't write in a vacuum. They are influenced by other artists, historical events, cultural contexts, and existing texts, and human progress depends on our ability to build on what came before. What's more, with the digital tools that are now so widely available, it's easier than ever before to create remixes—mashups, edits, blends, and megamixes. While many amateur works of this nature exist that aren't particularly inspiring, there are also many digital remixes that are engaging, enjoyable, and thought-provoking, providing an outlet for the author's creativity and expression and adding to the collective repertoire of ideas from which we all benefit. However, copyright law is still a fundamental concept for all published works, serving to protect the artistic integrity and financial remuneration of the author. The purpose of copyright was to promote the development of new ideas by providing a mechanism of control and financial incentive for people who invest their time and expertise in scientific and creative works. According to the [Copyright Alliance](#), "The theory is that by granting certain exclusive rights to creators that allow these creators to protect their creative works against theft, creators receive the benefit of economic rewards and the public receives the benefit of the creative works that might not otherwise be created or disseminated." In many cases, copyright law creates a barrier for people to redistribute, remediate, remix, or revise someone else's work without their express permission, and now that there are so many digital tools that make those very practices so much easier, it's more important than ever to understand what the rules are.

In this chapter, we'll discuss the history of remix culture and explore arguments made by Lawrence Lessig and others who see the inherent value in being able to remix. We'll also explore different examples of remix and the ways these examples have expanded in recent years with the development of new social media platforms. The second part of the chapter will look more closely at copyright law within the context of the digital age, providing key terms and guidelines about the rules as well as the consequences of breaking those rules.

- Understand the arguments advanced by remix culture about the importance of creative freedom and the inherent remix that shapes all thoughts and texts.
- Learn about key terms and the different types of remix that are possible in music and how those same terms can be applied to other types of texts.
- Consider how remix has shaped the development of cultures throughout history and how remix culture has emerged in response to stricter copyright laws.
- Connect the shift between "read-only" culture to "read-write" culture with the advancements of digital technology.
- Understand both sides of the debate regarding the benefits and drawbacks of remix culture.
- Learn about copyright law and the types of works that do and do not qualify for copyright.
- Learn about the law of fair use and be able to apply it to a wide range of works.
- Learn about the different types of copyright licenses and the permissions they afford.

Remix Culture

Remix has become an umbrella term to refer to derivative works, created by combining or editing existing content. As we'll see in

this chapter, [remix culture](#) encourages derivative works, believing that digital editing tools have provided a valuable way for more people to take an active role in the production of creative and scientific works (Murray). Many proponents of remix argue that the process of remix is an inherent part of the creative process and that copyright laws have become too strict, thus inhibiting the creative process and prioritizing corporate greed. Others see the more blatant forms of remix—beginning with others' music, videos, images, or texts—as mimicry, which sidesteps the creative process, unfairly leverages the talents of other artists, and impedes the unique voices, perspectives, and styles that might have emerged otherwise.

However, before we examine the history of remix and the various perspectives, let's look at a few key terms and the overwhelming prominence of remix. On a fundamental level, to "remix" means to mix again—to take existing elements and rearrange them to create something different. "Remix" is an umbrella term that captures all kinds of processes (adding, removing, or adjusting elements in some way) in a variety of media (text, music, film, and graphic art as well as live plays and spoken word). According to [Remix Theory](#), it's "the activity of taking samples from pre-existing materials to combine them into new forms according to personal taste" (Navas). Under this broad definition, several different types of remix exist, often related to audio production since that's one of the most common forms of remix:

- Production remix—starts with the "stem" of an old song, utilizing new instruments and other stylistic choices to create something different than the original. In some cases, the music may change dramatically to accommodate the original lyrics, or the lyrics themselves might change to reflect new interpretations of the song. An "official remix" happens with the original artist's consent, and a "bootleg" does not.
- Flip or sample flip—uses a small sampling of an original song

and turns it into a completely new piece of music.

- VIP or variation in production—is a remix done by the original artist to put a new spin on an old song.
- Edit—makes minor changes to the song related to tempo or elements that might be added, dropped, or changed. These types of edits are often done by DJs to make songs flow together better or to make a song more entertaining for a live audience on a dance floor.
- Mashup—mixes together two or more different songs to create a new track. In some cases, the words of one song are combined with the instrumentals of another.

These musical remixes were around long before the rise of digital media and the technologies that make it so much easier to sample, remix, and mashup songs. For instance, Madonna was known for remixing her own songs in the 1980s, which is one of the ways she gained popularity (O'Brien). Art of Noise (The Art of Noise Online) and Girl Talk (Booker) created new songs entirely out of existing works. In fact, some bands such as Nine Inch Nails and Erasure have encouraged fans to remix their music.

In addition to the possibilities that exist in the music industry, the term "remix" has been extended to include many different types of compositions—literature, paintings, film, and graphic design. Many types of remix have become much easier and more commonplace with the rise of technologies like Photoshop and GarageBand, but many other examples have existed for centuries. Some common examples of remix include:

- Food recipes, which are modified and combined with other recipes to create something new.
- Parodies are works that comment on or make fun of another work, often in a humorous or satirical way. While many contemporary parodies exist (e.g., Weird Al Yankovic [Sulem] or Family Guy [Lagioia]), this genre dates back to ancient Greek literature (SuperSummary).

- Paintings and graphic arts combine new and existing elements. Think of how many times the Mona Lisa or American Gothic have been remixed. [Many examples](#) of remixes exist that have taken historical photos and paintings and reimagined them with a more contemporary twist (Rogers).
- [Fanfiction](#) creates new stories from characters and settings that already exist (Collins). While this type of writing has existed for a long time, the internet has made it much easier to access existing stories and for writers and readers to come together to share and discuss their work.
- Wiki platforms like Wikipedia and Wikimedia Commons encourage users to access, add to, and remix existing content in order to invite collaboration and add to the existing pool of knowledge.
- Book mashups combine two or more existing stories into one. [Some examples](#) include *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, and *It's a Wonderful Death* (Goodreads).
- Literary intertextuality is where one text alludes to another text, either directly or implicitly. In some instances, this includes quoted material from an original text. For instance, in *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams quotes from Walt Whitman's poem "My Captain." Or it might take the form of an allusion, which makes an implicit connection to another text. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* alludes to the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, which would have created an instant image in readers' minds. Intertextuality can also include the retelling of classic stories. For instance, the more contemporary film 10 *Things I Hate about You* is a contemporary take on Shakespeare's classic play *The Taming of the Shrew*.
- Memes and GIFs are also forms of intertextuality, relying on the audience's familiarity with a particular photo or scene from a movie in order to understand the implied meaning.
- [Open source software](#) makes it possible for users to access

code that would otherwise have been proprietary so that they can add to, modify, or enhance the code in some way to create something new (OpenSource.com).

- Film can be used to blend a variety of content. Many contemporary movies are adaptations of classic novels, comic book stories, or older films. YouTube videos and TikToks also incorporate elements from other videos, movies, photos, and songs.
- Academic texts build from other academic texts, often implicitly through quoted information and citations but also implicitly through various genre conventions, organizational strategies, and rhetorical choices. Most scientific studies build on studies that have already been conducted.

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Activity 17.1

</div>

The above section provides some basic types of remix along with several examples. For this activity you should:

1. Review the different types of remix listed and see if you can come up with more examples that would fit under each category.
2. See if you can identify types of remix that haven't been identified above along with an example or two.

</div>

History of Remix Culture

The history of remix culture is a long one, and it's incredibly

complex. Some texts are fairly obvious in the ways that they have purposely integrated elements from preexisting texts. Other texts are much more subtle, and it would be impossible to trace all of the different experiences that came together to influence all of the artistic (or academic) choices the author(s) made. While this section endeavors to provide a very brief overview of that history, the main point is to trace the underlying arguments by many proponents of remix culture and to demonstrate how prevalent the concept of remix has been throughout history. As we will see, many high-profile texts and pivotal inventions are a form of remix, which begs the question of where our society might be now if it weren't for remix culture.

Though many people might equate the digital age with the rise of remix culture, the reality is that remix has been around for centuries, often as a comment on the culture of the time and almost always building from other works that came before. Writing for the World Intellectual Property Organization, Guilda Rostama says, "Most cultures around the world have evolved through the mixing and merging of different cultural expressions." She goes on to list examples of oral traditions dating back to medieval times, Renaissance architecture inspired by ancient Rome and Greece, and folk traditions in the nineteenth century. Some also note that the Panchatantra, dating back to around 400 BCE is an early form of remix (Roy). Another example can be found in the early Quaker movement in the seventeenth century, in which followers told Bible stories in their own words and reenacted scenes from the Bible (Daniels).

However, remix culture truly emerged in the twentieth century as new technologies made different types of remix possible. In Everything Is a Remix, Kirby Ferguson traces the remix history of individual songs and artists and the way genres of music took shape through remixing techniques. For instance, he notes that as early as the 1970s, DJs were looping songs together at dance parties, alternating between two or more songs, and speaking words to the beat of the music, all of which sparked the beginning of

rap. Sampling became more complex, combining different kinds of sound effects and mixing techniques and expanding to other genres like hip-hop and rock. All songs, according to Furguson, employ remix ideas, starting with existing ideas and transforming and combining them into something else. Some examples are fairly subtle, perhaps using chords, stylistic techniques, and turns of phrase that are fairly common. Others are more obvious and have sparked a great deal of controversy over the years. For instance, Greg Gillis's Girl Talk project was a "series of flagrantly illegal mashup albums that can be downloaded for free. Each song is composed entirely of dozens of uncleared samples by popular artists" (Furgeson). Gillis is featured in the 2008 open source documentary *RIP: A Remix Manifesto*, which explores the concept of copyright in the digital age ([Gaylor](#)). Led Zeppelin is another group that has been criticized for copying lyrics from other songs, even being accused of plagiarizing part of the song "Taurus" in its 1971 release of "Stairway to Heaven." The lawsuit finally came to court in 2016, with the jury deciding that "the descending musical pattern shared by both songs had been a common musical device for centuries. One example cited was Chim Chim Cher-ee, from the 1964 Disney musical *Mary Poppins*" ([BBC](#)).

As new remix techniques emerged in the 1970s, the Copyright Act of 1976 was put in place to thwart unrestricted use of licensed materials, imposing strict financial penalties to anyone who violated the rules. For instance, if the Led Zeppelin lawsuit cited above had turned in favor of the plaintiff, Zeppelin would have had to repay somewhere between $3 million and $4 million. As a result of these restrictions and penalties that some people felt discouraged creativity and civic participation, remix culture advanced as a form of protest. Professor Lawrence Lessig is a Harvard law professor and a political activist who founded Creative Commons in 2001 to provide a platform where people can access, share, and build upon other people's work. In his book, *Remix*, Lessig says copyright restrictions of the twentieth century discouraged people from taking an active role in the creative process. "The 20th century was

the first time in the history of human culture when popular culture had become professionalized, and when the people were taught to defer to the professional" (29).

The advancement of digital media was also an important shift toward remix culture. While analog media encouraged a "read-only" culture in which people were passive consumers, digital media allowed a "read-write" culture that was more reciprocal, allowing people to not only consume but produce creative works. Videos and audio files could be reproduced over and over without losing quality. In the 1980s, home computers became more popular and the [free and open software movement](#) sparked a cultural shift in favor of resources that allow materials to be freely used and edited by anyone (Tozzi). Also the rise of Web 2.0, defined by platforms that allow for more collaboration and user-generated content, provided even more opportunities for people to remix texts, photos, videos, songs, and more. Now anyone can create remixes, edits, and spinoffs, and it is a very common form of expression that provides entertainment and provokes further conversation.

The Remix Controversy

Despite its prevalence, remix culture is controversial, begging the question of where the line is between creative inspiration drawing that builds on previous ideas and outright plagiarism. On the one hand, people argue that remix is a natural part of the thought process and that it has immense cultural and social value. Kirby Ferguson, for instance, argues on his website [Everything is a Remix](#) as well as his [TED Talk](#) *Embrace the Remix* that all ideas are essentially a remix, incorporating the basic elements of copying, combining, and transforming previous content. We learn first by copying what others have created, which becomes a gateway to transforming and combining elements to create something "new." "I think these aren't just the components of remixing," Furgeson said

in his TED Talk. "I think these are the basic elements of all creativity. I think everything is a remix, and I think this is a better way to conceive of creativity." Similarly, [Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel](#) point out that remix extends far beyond the act of combining or revising songs or pictures. It's a broad concept that defines what a culture is: "We could say that knowledge is a remix, that politics is a remix, and so on. Always and everywhere, this is how cultures have been made—by remixing: taking what others have created, remixing it, and sharing with other people again" (Lankshear and Knobel).

As ChatGPT, Bard, and other generative AI platforms have emerged, educators and digital writers alike have found more complex and productive uses for these technologies, beyond the simple (and largely unethical and ineffective) practice of inputting a prompt and then copying and pasting the resulting text. For instance, these platforms can be used to help brainstorm topic ideas, create outlines, provide examples of genre conventions, as well as expand or revise content that has already been written. In fact, a recent study by Wieland et al. in *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence* found that people are [more productive when brainstorming or developing ideas using artificial intelligence](#) (a platform that wasn't judging their ideas) than with another person. In other words, like all other writing where every idea and writing strategy is a remix, writing produced in collaboration with generative AI is also a remix, and that isn't always a bad thing.

Of course, proponents of remix culture are quick to point out the many examples of remix, many of which are identified above, that have greatly benefited society as a whole. Ferguson's TED Talk provides several more examples of remixes by Bob Dylan and Steve Jobs. He has quotes from Picasso as well as Henry Ford clarifying that they didn't create anything entirely new; they built on artwork and discoveries that came before. Many classic examples of remix can be found in the works of Walt Disney. Not only is Disney [remaking many of the old classics](#), like *Lion King* and *Dumbo* (Simmonds), but many of the original characters in Disney movies

originated from other stories in the public domain (Khanna). Even our contemporary version of Mickey Mouse underwent several remixes over the years on his journey to being the Disney icon (Trammell). However, in addition to the prevalence of remix, advocates also argue for the social value. Ferguson says, "Rixing can empower you [to] be more creative. Remixing allows us to make music without playing instruments, to create software without coding, to create bigger and more complex ideas out of smaller and simpler ideas" ("Everything"). Not only does remixing add to the cultural repertoire of artistic works, but it teaches people to actively engage in political discussions and cultural activities, providing a means of participation, critique, and even social protest. For instance, memes (Williams) and hashtags (Vickery) have been used to advance political movements like the #MeToo and the #BlackLivesMatter movements. It's obvious, then, why advocates like Ferguson and Lessig ("Re-examining") argue that copyright law is too restrictive, stifling creative and political expression, used for the financial gain of artists and other creators who used remix in their own creations. Their argument is predicated on the way that copyright law has changed throughout history. While the original copyright law in 1790 allowed for 14 years of copyright protection for a work with the opportunity to renew copyright for another 14 years—28 years total, the current interaction extends copyright protection for the life of the author plus another 70 years. Their argument also assumes that "remix" involves some sort of transformation of the original work. Copying or plagiarizing a text isn't the type of "remix" that Ferguson and Lessig support.

On the other side of the debate, people argue that remix culture encourages plagiarism, that artists should have the rights to their own creative works and be able to control how they are altered and disseminated. In some instances, remix takes the original text out of context and alters it to purposely misrepresent the original idea. There is also the fact that many people are paid for their creative works, and they lose money and notoriety when their works are taken without financial compensation or due credit. An article

[in](#) *The Atlantic* by Adrienne LaFrance underscores this problem by describing the experience of an artist named Gelila Mesfin, whose artwork was displayed on Pinterest without proper credit and then copied by someone else who used it as a mural as part of an urban planning initiative, calling it his own form of art. LaFrance says, "The same tools that enable artists to share their work widely makes it easier for those same artists to get ripped off by outsiders who sometimes profit from this kind of theft. These incidents are especially fraught, too, because of how often the person benefiting is already privileged and powerful." In other words, the professionals who spent years developing their craft and developing the skills to create various forms of art lose out because of blatant theft by people who don't have those same professional talents and skills. Craig Robinson is another artist who was mentioned in LaFrance's article because his work was copied by someone else using his ideas who claimed that "everything is a remix" when he confronted her. "Which is convenient, isn't it?" Robinson said. "Very convenient that your school of thinking allows you to piggyback off my idea, my work, my hours and hours and thousands of hours to get yourself a sugary write-up in the New York bloody Times and exhibitions in New York" (qtd. in LaFrance).

Another argument against remix centers on the fact that many of the original artists are from marginalized groups whose cultural expressions are appropriated and twisted to fit someone else's agenda. April Reign, the managing editor of the website Broadway Black, told *Wired* [magazine](#), "I cannot name a person of color who has created something viral and capitalized off of it" (qtd. in Ellis). Similarly, [Thomas Joo](#) argues that remix isn't really a form of equal opportunity in which individuals find their voice. More often than not, he says, the "dominant [cultural] institutions appropriate from the underdog" and "use their influence to 'drown out' those individual voices" (415), which only reinforces dominant ideologies and the social injustices that those individual voices are trying to work against.

It's a complex issue as both sides advocate for artistic

freedom and the value that such expression has in society. The digital age has made things more complicated as olds works are remediated into new forms and have made it possible to significantly transform the original work, sometimes beyond recognition. Judges tend to focus on the degree of transformation of a remixed work as well as the type of alterations made to the original (LaFrance). There is also the question of the author's original intent and whether they are still living, assuming that the original author can be identified. In fact, as remix culture advances and digital technologies continue to evolve, the very concept of authorship has become a complicated one, making it difficult to identify where even our most "original" ideas came from and what we can claim as our own.

Activity 17.2

Write a reflection based on the controversy surrounding remix culture. Which side of the controversy do you agree with more and why? What are some of the most compelling arguments on the other side of the debate? You should also comment on your own opinion regarding the line in which "remix" becomes "plagiarism."

See if you can find other examples, like the ones cited above, to support your position.

Copyright Law

The debate about remix culture is directly related to the idea of intellectual property and the desire to protect authors' rights and encourage ingenuity. Copyright law is intended to provide that protection. Grounded in the U.S. Constitution, copyright literally means "the right to copy," and as stated in the [Copyright Act of 1976](#), it's automatically given to the author of a work, whether it is written text, graphic art, or a recording. It provides that individual with the sole right to publish, print, copy, and distribute their work (U. S. Copyright Office, "Copyright Law"). While many people register their work with the U.S. Copyright Office in order to have documented proof in the event that someone violates their copyright, an original work is protected automatically "the moment it is created and fixed in a tangible form that is perceptible either directly or with the aid of a machine or device" ([U.S. Copyright Office](#), "Copyright in General"). In other words, a text that exists in your mind isn't protected, but the minute that you write it down on paper or type it up on a screen, it has copyright protection. Similarly, a dance or theater performance isn't protected when it is performed because it's not yet in a "fixed and tangible" medium. However, if the play is written down or the dance is recorded on film, then it has copyright protection.

You might typically associate copyright with literary texts—poems, short stories, novels, memoirs, and so on—but it extends to many different types of authorship, including academic essays, news stories, songs, computer software, architectural blueprints, sculptures, movies, and more. To receive copyright, three elements must be present:

- **Originality.** It is the work of the author and hasn't been copied from someplace else. Based on our discussion in the remix section of this chapter, it's clear that the term "original" is hard to pin down. According to the [University Libraries](#) at the

University of North Texas, "This doesn't mean it has to be 'novel' in the way an invention must be to get a patent." While the idea itself might not be new, the expression of that idea should be unique to that author.

- **Creativity.** According to the U.S. Supreme Court, a work must have a "modicum" of creativity to have copyright. This is in some ways up to the interpretation of individual courts, but the main idea is that lists of names and numbers don't require any sort of creativity while other forms of expression that are less straightforward and obvious do.
- **Fixation.** As mentioned above, the work must be in a fixed medium that is stable and can be perceived by an audience.

Given these criteria, you can probably see that many things aren't protected by copyright. For one thing, there's a difference between a copyright, a patent, and a trademark. The U.S. Copyright Office explains that a copyright applies to "works of authorship," while a patent is more appropriate for an invention, process, discovery, or scientific creation. A trademark is more about branding, intended to protect things like logos, symbols, taglines, and slogans that are associated with a particular brand. In other words, a tagline wouldn't be protected by copyright, but it might be eligible for trademark protection. Other things that aren't eligible for copyright include the following (U.S. Copyright Office, "Circular 33"):

- **Ideas, concepts, or processes**. As stated above, these might be more appropriate for a patent. While you certainly could write down the idea or create a drawing that represents a particular system, the word choice or the drawing would be protected by copyright, but the underlying idea or process isn't.
- **Names, titles, and short phrases**. This one might be surprising: the title of a work, such as a novel or a movie, isn't protected by copyright. Similarly, the name of a business, a slogan or catchphrase, the name of a character, or a domain name or URL can't be copyrighted.

- **Facts and discoveries**. These are things that weren't created by an individual and therefore aren't eligible for copyright or patent protection.
- **Straightforward language about a process or function.** While very creative expressions of an idea or process can be copyrighted, some expressions are very common or don't have creative elements. For instance, the phrase "Preheat the oven to 350 degrees" is a very common phrase that doesn't have any creativity. It wouldn't be protected by copyright.
- **Typeface and special lettering**. In other words, a specific font can't be copyrighted.
- **The layout or format of a document or design**. The actual design would be protected by copyright, but a template of a web page or a magazine layout wouldn't.
- **Blank forms, such as order forms, scorecards, address books, timecards, and calendars.** "Blank forms that are designed for recording information and do not themselves convey information are not copyrightable" (U.S. Copyright Office, "Circular 33").
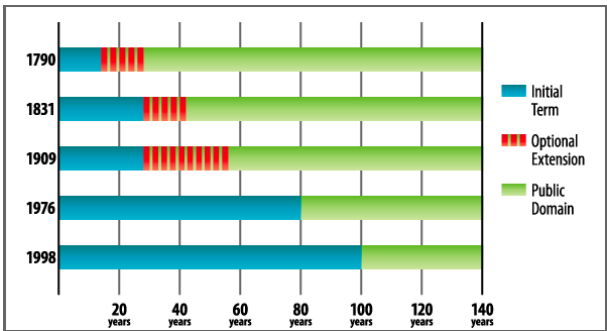
Copyright Chart by Duke University's Center, on Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Fair Use

The main exception to copyright law is called fair use, which allows

individuals to copy portions of a copyrighted work for certain purposes without explicit permission to do so. In many instances, fair use is about copying only a small part of a protected work in order to fulfill a noncommercial purpose, such as archiving, teaching, critiquing, news reporting, or researching. A teacher in a classroom, for instance, can photocopy a page out of a textbook and hand out multiple copies to students for the sake of teaching a specific concept or idea.

According to [Copyright Law Section 107](#), several elements should be considered when deciding whether a protected work can be copied under fair use (U.S. Copyright Office, "Chapter 1"):

- "The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes." If something is copied for commercial reasons in order to make money or promote a product or service, then it wouldn't be protected under fair use. If something is reproduced for educational purposes or noncommercial purposes, it is more likely to be considered fair use, though there are other factors to consider.
- "The nature of the copyrighted work." Copyright is intended to protect creative expression, and therefore more creative works like novels, poems, or songs are less likely to be considered fair use than if it were a more technical or factual work like a textbook or a news article.
- "The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole." In this case, courts will consider the amount of the original work that is copied as well as the quality of the work. Smaller portions of the work are more likely to be considered fair use than larger portions. However, if the selected portion is a really significant section of the piece, containing the main idea or underlying personality of the whole thing, it might not be protected by fair use, even if it is a small portion.
- "The effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of

the copyrighted work." If the use of the copyrighted work creates financial harm to the creator, then it's less likely to be considered fair use. This is especially true if the use of the material is preventing people from buying their own copy of the original.

Harvard University notes that recently, courts have paid more attention to the degree to which the original work is "transformative," meaning that it has been added to or built upon in a way that changes the nature of the original work and provides new meaning (a.k.a. remix). While works copies of a work don't have to be transformative to be fair use (e.g., copies of a textbook excerpt in a classroom), "a use that supplants or substitutes for the original work is less likely to be deemed fair use than one that makes a new contribution and thus furthers the goal of copyright to promote science and the arts" (Harvard University). The Harvard University article goes on to mention other factors like common practice and the motives of the person copying the material to help determine whether it is fair use.

Activity 17.3

Review this worksheet that was created by the Copyright Advisory Office at Columbia University Libraries. It has a checklist that goes through each element of fair use. Use it to consider the various examples of copying listed below and whether each one is fair use and why or why not. Keep in mind that some of the examples are fairly complex and are open to interpretation by a jury.

- You repost or share a link to someone else's social

media post on your own account.

- A teacher copies a photo from Google Images and pastes it into their slideshow for class.
- A teacher photocopies an entire chapter of a textbook and distributes it to students so they don't have to purchase the book.
- A friend sends you a picture they took with their digital camera, and you use it to create a meme that you post on your social media page.
- Part of a popular song is used in a commercial.
- You edit part of a published film by inserting yourself into the scene and then posting it on YouTube.
- You and your friends perform a famous part of a song in your garage.
- You take the color scheme and overall layout of another website and apply it to your own.

Understanding Copyright Licenses

Because texts are so readily available in online spaces, it's important to be familiar with the different types of copyright licenses and what they mean. In all instances, the creator holds the copyright and gets to decide which type of license they want to use. A standard copyright, as noted above, prohibits other people from copying, adapting, or redistributing their work. However, there are other types of licenses (known as copyleft) that provide more flexibility in how they can be used. The most common copyleft license that allows the author to retain basic rights over their work while still allowing others to reuse it in different ways is a Creative Commons

license. Founded in 2001 by Lawrence Lessig (an advocate for remix culture and more lenient copyright laws), [Creative Commons](#) "is a nonprofit organization that helps overcome legal obstacles to the sharing of knowledge and creativity to address the world's most pressing challenges." As they explain on their website, the Creative Commons licenses are composed of four different elements or rules:

- BY: attribution is required (the author must be given credit)
- NC: No commercial use (can't be used to make money)
- ND: No derivative works (can't be changed)
- SA: Share alike, which applies only to derivative works and requires that they have the same license as the original.

Obviously, an ND and SA can't be combined to form a CC license, but the other elements can be combined in various ways to form six different licenses:

- CC BY (least restrictive)
- CC BY-SA
- CC BY-ND
- CC BY-NC
- CC BY-NC-SA
- CC BY-NC-ND (most restrictive)

Each Creative Commons license gives permission for people to share, but they include different rules that must be followed. Another type of license not listed above is the CC 0, which is the designation used for a work that is in the public domain. It is the same thing as "no rights reserved," meaning that the author has relinquished any claim on the work and it can be used, adapted, and copied without limit.

Understanding how copyright works and the types of licenses that are available is important so that you can ensure you are using material legally. All work should have some sort of

copyright designation, but when in doubt, you should always contact the original author and get written permission to use their work in whatever way you intend.

Remix culture and copyright law have evolved in tandem over the last few decades as digital technologies have enhanced our ability to access, modify, and redistribute information. Interestingly, they are both focused on protecting the artistic and scientific progress of our society, but they envision the creative process in different ways. Whatever school of thought you espouse, it's important to understand the ways that digital media encourages a more participatory culture where new ideas and different forms of expression emerge, but it's equally important to understand the legal restrictions that are in place and the consequences of misuse.

Discussion Questions

1. What is a remix? Give a definition of the different types of remix along with some examples.
2. How can the concept of remix be applied to other forms of knowledge and expression beyond music?
3. What is the purpose of copyright law? How does the concept of remix contradict the underlying principles of copyright?
4. In what ways has remix shaped human history? Why did remix culture emerge so strongly in the twentieth century? What were some of the factors that facilitated its advancement?
5. Explain the remix controversy. What are some of the important arguments for and against remix?
6. Why is the concept of "ownership" and "originality"

so complex? How does digital media further complicate these ideas?

7. Explain what copyright is and how a work gains copyright protection. What are the three elements that must be in place for a work to be copyrighted?

8. What are some examples of works that can be copyrighted? What works can't?

9. Explain what fair use means and what the standards are for deciding whether copying a work is considered fair use.

10. How does a Creative Commons license extend permission to users beyond a traditional copyright?

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18. Editing Your Work

A lot of people bemoan what they perceive to be a disregard for basic grammar and punctuation rules as different forms of digital writing have emerged. For instance, research by the [Pew Research Center](#) found that the majority of AP (Advanced Placement) and NWP (National Writing Project) teachers have mixed feelings about digital media, feeling that on one hand, it promotes more opportunities for different types of writing and collaboration and a deeper awareness of audience and other rhetorical considerations (Purcell et al.). However, they also feel that the shift to reading and writing informal texts have "diminished" students' ability to attend to the more precise aspects of their writing—word choice, grammar, punctuation. In a survey of AP and NWP teachers, 68% expressed concern that digital tools make it more likely that students will "take shortcuts and not put effort into their writing." Respondents also noted concerns about "spelling and grammar" and writing that is "too fast" and "careless" (Purcell et al.).

Perhaps text messaging is one of the best examples. With the affordances of text messages, we can easily stay in touch with people all day long, quickly reading short messages and responding in kind as time allows. This is an incredibly informal form of writing. It's not unusual to see a text message with no punctuation or capitalization at all. Instead it's filled with SMS language (abbreviations), slang, emojis, and GIFs—all of which convey meaning and can go a long way to advance conversations, provide entertainment, and forge social connections. Text messaging and social media posts have significantly expanded the types of and the amount of writing that people do each day, which is a major benefit. However, the concern is that when tasked with a more formal type of writing—an academic essay, an email to a colleague or supervisor, or even a blog post or white paper—people will approach them in

the same way, with little attention to prewriting, organization, or proofreading for accuracy and clarity.

The reality is that concerns about students' ability to write "correctly" (i.e., according to grammar and punctuation rules for Standard American English) and the debate about which writing skills merit the most attention go back a long way. As early as 1874, Harvard added a writing component to its already rigorous entrance exam for potential applicants, and [more than half of students](#) taking the exam that year failed and were therefore required to take remedial writing courses before they were considered ready for college-level writing (Haswell). Grammar and punctuation drills were normal in English classes throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, and even still, in 1974, a *Newsweek* article titled "[Why Johnny Can't Write](#)" decried the "appalling" literacy statistics and the growing number of surface-level errors that undermined basic writing proficiency. The article begins like this: "If your children are attending college, chances are that when they graduate, they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity" (Sheils). It goes on to discuss the connection between low reading levels (as predicted by Marshall McLuhan with the growth of television culture) and poor writing skills and the deficit of professionals and "civil servants" who can write effectively (Sheils). Since then, more writing teachers have focused on other aspects of writing—depth of content and the underlying ideas and insights, rhetorical considerations, and writing processes that help students think about their writing in stages.

Certainly, there is much more to effective writing than correct grammar and punctuation. It has to catch readers' attention, offer insights that help readers think about a topic in new ways, demonstrate logical thinking, and in some cases, spark an emotional response that prompts readers to take action. However, as this chapter will discuss, correctness matters too, adding clarity and credibility to your writing. While there are far too many grammar and punctuation rules to cover in one chapter, we'll cover some of the most fundamental, paying particular attention to common

mistakes. We'll also discuss strategies for concise writing, which is especially important in digital writing.

Revising vs. Editing

Sometimes you might hear the words "revising" and "editing" used

interchangeably, as if they are the same thing, but there are significant differences. Revision relates to "big picture" or "global" changes that you make to a draft to improve the content and organization. It might be that the process of writing the draft helped you think through your ideas more clearly, and you've changed your mind about the direction of your text. Maybe you've changed your mind about your argument or the way that you want to approach your argument. Revision might also relate to the way that you develop your content, providing more examples or reasoning or explanation in the text. In contrast, it might be that you got derailed from your original topic in some places, and you need to condense or eliminate sections that aren't central to the point you want to make. Finally, revision could entail reorganization—moving around sentences or entire paragraphs so the flow of your text is more logical and easy to follow.

In contrast, the editing process takes a closer look at individual sentences, making more "local" changes that don't relate as much to the content and organization. It's more about making sure that sentences have correct grammar and punctuation, consistent usage, precise word choice, and a structure that is concise and enhances the flow. Once the overall structure of a text is set, the editing process is a way of polishing a text to make sure it is clear, easy to understand, and makes the right impression on the intended audience.

In terms of the writing process, the final editing typically comes last, but it's a bit of a misnomer to think that the writing process is linear. You've probably seen diagrams of the writing process that seem to move sequentially from brainstorming to prewriting to drafting to revising and, finally, to editing. The reality, though, is that the writing process is messy, resisting predictable steps and a clear order. In fact, it's often more recursive than linear, and you might find yourself doing more brainstorming while you are drafting, for instance, or rethinking some of your original ideas even as you are proofreading for errors. Also, many people have a pretty natural understanding of grammar and punctuation rules and

tend to polish their sentences for accuracy and word choice in their initial draft. However, the final edit should always come last and, ideally, include a couple of different people focusing on the smaller details of a draft. While you might not feel that any text is ever really "perfect," it's amazing the errors you will catch and the tangible improvements you can make with just one more read through.

The bottom line is that proofreading, along with having a solid understanding of at least the most common grammar and punctuation rules, has significant rhetorical value. Remember rhetoric? It's the purpose of your text. It's the main idea that you are trying to convey in order to invoke some sort of change in your reader—to deepen their understanding of an issue, to make a personal connection, to challenge their thinking on a controversial issue, to provoke some sort of action. You might think that the final edit is more like the frosting on the cake than anything of real substance or consequence, but some proofreading errors create confusion for readers, making it more difficult for them to read and understand your work, which is a significant barrier to the success of your text. Also, proofreading errors can diminish your ethos—your credibility or authority in the minds of readers. A text with punctuation, spelling, or grammar errors creates the impression that the writer was either too lazy or careless to proofread or that they don't understand what the rules are. Either way, these errors can have a profound impact on readers' impression of a text and how they respond.

Activity 18.1

Go back to the last thing that you wrote, preferably not a

text message. An email or even a class assignment could work for this activity.

First you should briefly consider your own process and how carefully you believe you proofread this text before you submitted it.

Now go through and proofread the document thoroughly. See how many grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors you can find. Also circle or underline words or phrases that you think could be more precise.

Now switch with someone else. How many more errors or editing suggestions can you find on this person's paper that they missed?

Trade papers and then discuss. Which errors surprised you? Which errors are you unsure about? Where did you and your partner differ when it came to proofreading suggestions?

A Note about Dialect

The remainder of this chapter focuses on common rules related to grammar, punctuation, and conciseness, all stemming from the Standard American English dialect that is most often taught in English courses and advanced as "correct" in professional and technical writing. However, there are many legitimate [English dialects](), each one with its own pronunciation of words as well as unique vocabularies and grammar rules (Laperre). As we've discussed throughout this textbook, rhetoric is extremely contextual, so what is "correct" can vary significantly from one

situation to the next. Like language itself, grammar and punctuation rules are socially constructed, created for the primary purpose of enhancing communication, and those rules evolve over time. The point of this chapter is not to promote Standard American English as more correct or legitimate than any other dialect. Rather, it is a starting point to cultivate greater awareness of how grammar and punctuation rules function so that you can apply them effectively to your own writing. It's important to remember, too, that grammar and punctuation rules have historically been used as a means of [exclusion,](#) to separate those who are "educated" from those who are not and to create further barriers to socioeconomic advancement for minority groups (Wetherbee). At its best, however, attention to grammar and punctuation is a means of *inclusion*, making your text more accessible to readers who desire to be part of the conversation.

Basic Grammar Rules

This section will review a few grammar concepts, many of which are probably familiar and some that might be new or forgotten. Of course, you can always look up information about more complicated or nuanced grammar rules. Here we focus on common mistakes that can make it difficult for readers to understand the meaning of your writing and create a more negative impression of you and your message. Being able to consistently follow these rules will go a long way toward writing that is easy to read and more fluid.

Subject-Verb Agreement

This rule focuses on the subject of a sentence and whether it is in singular or plural form. A singular subject requires a singular verb

just as a plural subject requires the plural form of the verb. Some examples:

> *The squirrel climbs the tree.*
>
> *Those boys are on the same basketball team.*

Sometimes, it's a little more difficult to find the actual subject of the sentence. For instance:

> A *flock of geese is flying overhead.*

In this example, "flock" is the actual subject, which is singular, while "geese" is the object of the preposition. Here's another example:

> *Feeding the animals at the zoo is prohibited.*

Here, the subject of the sentence is a gerund phrase. "Feeding the animals" works together to form the subject of the sentence, and even though "animals" is plural, the action that is implied in the gerund "feeding" is singular.

Some other things to consider when it comes to subject-verb agreement are the following:

- Two singular nouns linked with "and" are considered a plural subject.

  - *Sarah and Maggie are on their way.*

- Two singular nouns linked with "or" are considered a singular subject.

  - *Either Mom or Dad is coming to my game this afternoon.*

- Indefinite pronouns are typically considered singular (anybody, one, everyone, nobody, etc.).

  - *Nobody likes getting a speeding ticket.*
  - *Everyone is getting ready for the final exam.*

- Sentences that begin with "there is" and "there are" agree with the noun that follows, which is the true subject of the sentence.

  - *There are only four cookies left in the box.*
  - *There is rain moving into the area.*
  - One common rule of thumb is to try to avoid sentence

constructions that begin with "there is" or "there are" to be more concise and put emphasis on the true subject. For instance: *Rain is moving into the area. Only four cookies are left in the box.*

- A subject that is joined by the correlative conjunctions "not only...but also," "neither...nor," "either...or" will have a verb that agrees with the subject closest to it.

  ◦ *Not only the students but also the teacher is looking forward to summer break.*
  ◦ Either my dog or the squirrels in the backyard are responsible for this mess.

Subject-Pronoun Agreement

Similar to subject-verb agreement, subject-pronoun agreement focuses on whether the subject of the sentence is singular or plural. In order to avoid the redundancy of naming the subject over and over, writers will use pronouns to refer back to the subject. Once again, a plural subject requires a plural pronoun and a singular subject requires a singular pronoun.

> *The doctor was running late and asked the nurse practitioner to fill in for her.*

> *Motorcyclists have a special connection. They always wave when they pass each other.*

Of course, pronouns can sometimes be tricky in a sentence with more than one subject. Consider the following example:

> *My mom and sister were in an accident. She got a minor concussion.*

Here the pronoun "she" is confusing. It's unclear which antecedent (the noun that the pronoun refers to) "she" corresponds to, the mother or the sister. Consider another example:

> *I accidentally drove your car into the garage door and badly damaged it.*

Again, it's unclear whether "it" refers to the car or the garage door. Another similar problem with pronouns is if they occur in a sentence that is separated from the antecedent by several sentences, which might make it difficult for readers to remember who or what the pronoun refers to. In that case, you'd want to be sure to explicitly name the noun to aid readers' understanding. Similarly, if the ideas presented in the text are somewhat complex, instead of saying "this idea," it would probably be more helpful for readers if you rearticulated the idea for them.

Some other important subject-pronoun guidelines to keep in mind include the following:

- Recently, "they" has become increasingly accepted as a singular pronoun for a singular subject, which helps eliminate gendered pronouns as well as the clunky "he or she" or "his or her" construction for an indefinite subject. For instance, instead of saying

  ◦ *One must pay close attention to his or her surroundings.*

  It has become acceptable to say

  ◦ *One must pay close attention to their surroundings.*

  Here's another example:

  ◦ *An anonymous donor funded our entire trip. They are so generous!*
- If possible, it's sometimes easier to simply make the subject plural to avoid disagreement. Instead of saying, A *teacher should work hard to engage their students*, it would be simpler to make the subject and pronoun plural: *Teachers should work hard to engage their students.*
- Two singular nouns connected with "and" become a plural antecedent and require a plural pronoun. *Mary and Gregg walked to their car.*

- Two singular nouns connected with "or" are a singular antecedent and require a singular pronoun. *Either Sarah or Esther left her book on the table.*
- A subject that is joined by the correlative conjunctions "not only...but also," "neither...nor," "either...or" will have a pronoun that agrees with the subject closest to it.

  ◦ *Either my aunt or my sisters will let me share their hotel room.*

Sentence Boundaries

One of the most common writing mistakes involves a misunderstanding of sentence boundaries—where one sentence should end and another one should begin. Here is where an understanding of an "independent clause" as discussed above will be helpful. As a reminder, an independent clause can stand alone as a sentence because it has a subject and a verb, and it *doesn't* begin with a subordinating conjunction.

There are two common mistakes associated with sentence boundaries:

1. A **fragment sentence** can't stand alone as a sentence because it is missing a complete subject or predicate.

   ◦ For instance "*going to the store to get lemons*" is a fragment sentence because it's missing the subject. *Who* is going to the store to get lemons?
   ◦ Similarly, "*the vendor at the kiosk who took my credit card*" is also a fragment sentence because it doesn't have a predicate that indicates what this person did. The relative clause "who took my credit card" provides more information about which vendor is being discussed, but it's part of the subject. It needs a predicate to be complete:

The vendor at the kiosk who took my credit card is gone.

- ◦ The most common fragment sentence is one that begins with a subordinating conjunction, which makes the sentence a dependent clause. For instance, "*I love ice cream*" is an independent clause with a subject and a verb that can stand alone as a sentence. However, if you put a subordinating conjunction in the beginning, it becomes a dependent clause: "*Because I love ice cream.*" Now it's no longer a complete thought; it's a fragment sentence. It needs an independent clause to be complete: "*Because I love ice cream, I always have a carton in the freezer.*"

2. **Run-on sentences** put more than one independent clause together in the same sentence without using a conjunction to connect them. Instead of not having enough information to be a complete thought, a run-on sentence has two complete thoughts that should either be two separate sentences or be connected with a coordinating conjunction. Here are some examples:

    "*I paid for my ticket to the movie I didn't have enough money for popcorn.*" This is an example of a run-on sentence because there are really two independent clauses here that could stand alone as a sentence: "*I paid for my ticket to the movie*" and "*I didn't have enough money for popcorn.*"
    There are three ways to fix the above run-on sentence:

    - ◦ First, it could simply be broken into two separate sentences: "*I paid for my ticket to the movie. I didn't have enough money for popcorn.*"
    - ◦ Second, and probably most common, it could be combined into a single sentence with a coordinating conjunction (i.e., for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). A coordinating conjunction can be used to connect two independent clauses into a single sentence: "*I paid for my ticket to the movie, **but** I*

didn't have enough money for popcorn."

- ◦ Third, two independent clauses can be combined with a semicolon. We'll discuss punctuation rules in more detail below. For now, it's helpful to point out that a semicolon can combine two independent clauses, but there *wouldn't* be a coordinating conjunction. "*I paid for my ticket to the movie; I didn't have enough money for popcorn.*"
- ◦ Here are a few more examples of sentences with two independent clauses that use a coordinating conjunction to combine them into one sentence:

  - ■ *My daughter cleaned the house today,* **and** *she managed to mow the lawn, too.*
  - ■ *You can go to the restaurant with us,* **or** *you're welcome to drive yourself.*
  - ■ *I don't like exercising,* **nor** *do I watch what I eat.*
  - ■ *Tyler studies very hard,* **for** *he's trying to get into med school.*
  - ■ *They worked together to rake theleaves,* **so** *they finished theirchores more quickly.*
  - ■ *I've been getting up early for the past month,* **yet** *it's still difficult to get out of bed.*

Parallel Structure

Sentences with two or more ideas with equal weight should be parallel, meaning that they have the same grammatical pattern of words, usually beginning with the same part of speech. Verbs match up with verbs, nouns match up with nouns, and so on. Not only does this show that the ideas are equal, but it helps with clarity and readability. Let's look at a few examples:

- • *On any given weekend, you'll find her reading, napping, and trying to catch up on laundry.* This is an example of parallel

structure. All of the items in the list are gerunds.
- *The men's room is down that walkway and to your left.* Here the two items connected by the coordinating conjunction begin with prepositions.
- *Most people would describe that class as challenging but also interesting and fun.* Here all of the elements, combined with the use of two coordinating conjunctions, are adjectives.
- *To lose weight, one should exercise regularly, eat reasonable portions, and drink plenty of water.* All of the elements in this list begin with a verb.

A sentence that isn't parallel fails to follow the same pattern for similar items, which could create confusion, but more often than not, it just sounds strange. For instance:

- *I like baking, jogging, and to relax on the couch.* Do you see the problem? "To relax" isn't a gerund like the other elements in the list. It should say, "relaxing on the couch."
- *The financial advisor emphasized the importance of open communication, intentionality, and to think critically about how to reduce spending.* In this example, "communication" and "intentionality" are both nouns, but "to think" is an infinitive. To be parallel, that last item needs to become a noun. "Resourcefulness" could work.

There are several key instances when parallel structure is necessary:

- When similar items are joined by a coordinating conjunction.
  - *She takes her coffee with cream and sugar.*
  - *I don't want to go to the movies or get ice cream.*
- With elements in a list.
  - *The goalkeeper was attentive, aggressive, and quick.*
- With items that are being compared.

- ○   I like eating sushi more than I like making it.
- •   With items joined by a correlative conjunction (both/and, either/or, neither/nor, not only / but also, whether/or, as/so).
  - ○   *At the restaurant, we not only got appetizers, but we also ordered dessert.*
  - ○   *Just as the body needs exercise, so too does it need rest.*
  - ○   *More tests are needed to diagnose your illness and treat it effectively.*

Active Voice

Active voice simply means that the subject of the sentence is doing the action of the sentence and not being acted upon. This makes sentences more interesting and usually more concise. In contrast, a sentence in passive voice has a subject that is acted upon. Some examples:

- **Passive voice:** The exam was failed by more than half the students in class.
- **Active voice:** More than half the students in the class failed the exam.
- **Passive voice:** The window was broken by the kids playing baseball across the street.
- **Active voice:** The kids playing baseball across the street broke the window.
- **Passive voice:** The new puppy was given a bath by our neighbors.
- **Active voice:** Our neighbors gave the new puppy a bath.

An exception to the rule is when the agent doing the action is unknown or unimportant. In that case, putting the person or thing

being acted upon at the beginning of the sentence is useful for emphasis. For example:

- *I was notified today that I got the scholarship.*
- *The car was stolen yesterday.*

Other Common Mistakes

- **Dangling modifiers**: A word or phrase that is being modified isn't clearly stated in the sentence. Here's an example:
  - *Having finished the assignment, the television was turned on.* In this sentence, the phrase "having finished the assignment" is a modifying phrase, and as such, it should be followed up by the noun that is being modified. In other words, who or what finished the assignment? That person is missing from the sentence. A corrected version would look like this:
  - *Having finished the assignment, Sarah turned on the television.*
- **Misplaced modifiers**: A modifying word or phrase seems to be modifying the wrong word. Modifiers should always go close to the work they are describing, and when that doesn't happen it can create problems. For instance:
  - *I turned a gold man's watch in to the lost and found.* Here the word "gold" is misplaced. It should be next to the word "watch" to indicate that the watch was gold, but since it's next to man, it makes it seem like there is a gold man. A fixed version would put the modifier right next to the word being described:
  - *I turned a man's gold watch in to the lost and found.*

  Here are some other examples:

- *I put my dirty clothes in the hamper that I had worn.* (The modifying phrase "that I had worn" should go next to "clothes" instead of "hamper." It should read, "I put my dirty clothes that I had worn in the hamper.")
- *She arrived at the office out of breath.* ("Out of breath" should go near "she" instead of "the office." It should read, "She arrived out of breath at the office.")

- Who vs. whom: Use the word "who" when it is the subject of the sentence and "whom" when it is the object (receiving the action of the verb). For instance:

  - *Who knows the answer to this question?* (Here "who" is the subject completing the action of the verb.)
  - *To whom should I address the envelope?* ("Whom" is receiving the addressed envelope while "I" is doing the action.)
  - When in doubt, see if you can replace he or she with the word who or whom. If you can, then it should be "who"—the subject. If him or her makes more sense, then the word should be "whom"—the object. For instance: *He knows the answer to the question.* Also: *I will address the envelope to her.*

Fix the grammar errors in the following sentences (several have more than one error):

1. Alex like to get to the theater early so it can get a seat in the front row.
2. The team of football players were standing on the

3. Although the sun is shining today and the air is warm.
4. When my parents got home, they were upset that I had all of the lights on they is making me pay the light bill this month.
5. In his haste, Greg stubbed his toe on the chair, spilled his coffee, and he was forgetting to close the garage door.
6. Whom will pick you up after the dance?

Edit the following sentences so they are in active voice:

1. The taco dip was brought to the party by Mary.
2. Our most recent family vacation will always be fondly remembered by us.
3. The church was hurried to by Sarah, so she wouldn't be late for the wedding.

Try writing your own sentences with grammar errors or in active voice and switch with someone else to make corrections.

Punctuation

This section reviews punctuation rules. Again, we'll focus on some of the more common mistakes and the rules that will help you avoid those mistakes. While we won't discuss the most basic punctuation marks—periods, question marks, and exclamation marks, we will discuss the importance of several other punctuation marks and how they should be used to add clarity to a sentence.

Commas

Commas separate elements in a sentence to provide clarity. There are several instances when a comma is necessary:

- **Transition words**, such as *however*, *thus*, *therefore*, *nevertheless*, and so on.
  - *I don't, however, have the right tools to fix the washing machine myself.*
  - *Therefore, we need to call the repair specialist.*
- **Descriptive phrases** (sometimes called appositives) that help describe another element in the sentence. If the descriptive phrase provides additional information but isn't necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence or the referent, then commas are necessary to surround the information.
  - *Professor Snow, a longtime psychology professor on campus, will receive the award.*
  - *We're going to the sand dunes in August, the hottest month of the year.*
  - *Toni Morrison's book* Beloved *is my favorite.* (There wouldn't be commas in this sentence because the title of the book, *Beloved*, is essential to understanding which book is being discussed, since she has published more than one.)
- **Descriptive clauses** (i.e., relative clauses) that describe a noun in the independent clause. These require commas if they aren't necessary to understanding the meaning of the sentence or the identity of the referent. (This is also called a nonrestrictive relative clause.)
  - *The news report was published in* Science, **which is a leading academic journal***.* (The relative clause at the end isn't necessary to understand which journal is being discussed. It simply provides additional information.)

- *Our mail person, **who has been on our route for the last 25 years**, is retiring this spring.* (The relative clause gives additional information about the mail person, but it isn't necessary for understanding who the sentence is about.)
    - *College students **who suffer from dyslexia** should register with a counselor to get the help they need.* (In this example, the relative clause "who suffer from dyslexia" is restrictive. It's necessary to help readers understand which college students the sentence is about.)
- **Adjacent items** like dates and locations. Many people don't know that when you give a city and a state in a sentence, the state should be surrounded by commas. The same is true for a full date with the month, day, and year; the year should be surrounded by commas.

    - *The championship will take place in Madison, Wisconsin, this year.*
    - *He was born on July 2, 1902, at the local hospital.*
- **Coordinating conjunctions** that connect two independent clauses.

    - *I want to take that new history class, but it doesn't fit into my schedule.*
    - *I went to the theme park in the afternoon, and I couldn't believe how long the lines were.*
    - Note: There shouldn't be a comma if the conjunction *doesn't* separate two independent clauses. For instance: *I went to the theme park this afternoon and couldn't believe how long the lines were.* Since "couldn't believe how long the lines were" is a dependent clause, a comma isn't correct.
- **Lists** of similar items. Rules vary, but typically you'd want to include the Oxford (or serial) comma, which is the last comma in the series, right before the word "and" or "or."

    - *I will buy cereal, milk, and coffee at the store.*
- **Separated quotes** that are complete sentences. A comma

provides separation from the dialogue tag.

- ◦ *According to the American Cancer Society*, "*1 in 2 men and 1 in 3 women will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.*"
- ◦ "*I don't know what you're talking about,*" *he said.*
- **Subordinate clauses at the beginning of sentences**. Remember that a subordinate or dependent clause begins with a subordinating conjunction and can't stand alone as a sentence. It needs an independent clause. If the dependent clause comes at the beginning of the sentence, then a comma should come afterward. However, if it is attached to the end of the sentence, a comma isn't needed.

  - ◦ **When we get home**, *you need to get right to bed.* (Dependent clause in the beginning.)
  - ◦ *You need to get right to bed* **when we get home**. (Dependent clause at the end.)
  - ◦ **Because of the snow**, *school has been delayed.*
  - ◦ *School has been delayed* **because of the snow**.

  The two exceptions to this rule are the subordinating conjunctions "whereas" and "although," which still require a comma if they come in the middle of a sentence:

  - ◦ *The doctor's appointment went well, although her blood pressure seemed a little high.*

Semicolons

Semicolons also separate items in a sentence, but there are far fewer instances in which a semicolon is necessary:

- **To separate two independent clauses in the same sentence**. Remember that you can use a comma and a coordinating conjunction to link two or more independent clauses in a

sentence. Another option is to link them together with a semicolon, which is a cue to readers that the two clauses are connected. When you use a semicolon, avoid using a coordinating conjunction.

- ◦ *I didn't sleep very well last night; going to work today will be difficult.*
- ◦ *I don't eat strawberries because I'm allergic; they always give me a rash.*
- **To separate items in a list that have internal commas**. Lists are typically separated with commas, but if one or more items in that list has an appositive phrase or relative clause that requires a comma, then semicolons are used to distinguish between the modifying information and the larger items in the list.

  - ◦ *In attendance at the meeting were Mr. Morrison, the university president; Ms. Smith, the CEO; and Mr. Collins, our financial advisor.* Here, the semicolons show separation between the three main items in the list. If only commas were used, it would look like there were six people at this meeting instead of only three.
  - ◦ *On my schedule for next semester, I'm taking history, which I love; math, which I can tolerate; and archery, which I hope will be fun.*

Colons

A colon signals that something important is about to follow. It's used in the following instances:

- **To introduce a list**. When used this way, the information leading up to the colon should be an independent clause. A colon shouldn't be used in between a verb and its object.

- Correct: *At the market today, we bought the following items: bread, jam, pie, and homemade soap.*
- Incorrect: *At the market today, we bought: bread, jam, pie, and homemade soap.* (The colon isn't needed here.)

- **To further define or explain** a word or phrase that came before it.

  - *The intended readers are managers: people who are concerned with planning, budgeting, and allocation of resources and personnel.*

- **To introduce a quote with an independent clause**.

  - *In his debate speech, Mr. Reidy was clearly against tax increases: "I will do whatever is necessary to reduce spending."*

- **To show typographical distinctions or divisions**.

  - Dear Ms. Wong:
  - 7:30 a.m.
  - "Ethics Case Study: The Boundaries of Marketing Integrity"

Hyphens

Hyphens are used to join two or more words to make compound words and adjectives.

- In some instances, hyphens are used to **connect compound words** that are nouns—for instance, *decision-maker*, *twenty-four*, *mother-in-law*, *self-care*. Usually, you can look up these types of words to see if they should be hyphenated or not.
- Hyphens also connect words (often nouns) that act as adjectives in a sentence.

  - *Martha is a twenty-one-year-old girl.* ("Twenty-one-year-old" works together to modify "girl.")
  - *We went to an all-you-can-eat buffet.*

- ◦ *My doctor wants me to switch to low-impact exercises.*
- **Note**: Hyphens aren't needed for many compound words (e.g., *playground*), common prefixes and suffixes (e.g., *prelaw*, *joyful*), or -ly adverbs that are used with adjectives (e.g., *a highly esteemed position, a barely worn sweater*).

Dashes

There are two different kinds of dashes:

1. An em dash (—) is used to separate additional information, similar to the way that commas are used for this purpose, except that em dashes are used to emphasize the additional information.

   - ◦ *The meeting took two hours—much longer than anticipated—but we got a lot done.*

2. An en dash (–) is shorter than an em dash but longer than a hyphen. It's used to mark a range of dates, times, page numbers, or other measurements. It can also be used with compound adjectives.

   - ◦ *The Christmas party is scheduled for Friday evening, 6–8 p.m.*
   - ◦ *For tomorrow's assignment, please read chapter 5, pages 140–168.*

   - ◦ *I still have my grandmother's World War I–era dress.*

     Note: There aren't any spaces before and after em or en dashes.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used in two instances:

1. **To show possession**. For instance:

    1. Single possessive: *Kelly's book* or *My neighbor's new car*
    2. Plural possessive: S*tudents' grades are higher this semester. The studies' results show a correlation between sleep and cognitive performance.* Note that for plural possessive, the apostrophe goes *after* the "s."
    3. **Note**: To make a word that already ends in "s" possessive, add an apostrophe and s.

       1. *The Prius's tire is flat.*
       2. *Chris's wallet is still in the car.*
    4. **Another note**: There is a difference between joint possession, where more than one noun has ownership of the same item, and separate possession, where each noun has ownership of its own item.

       1. Joint ownership: *We're having dinner at mom and dad's house.* To show joint ownership, the apostrophe and s go after the last person or thing. Here, the home belongs to both mom and dad.
       2. Separate ownership: *Income is split evenly into mom's and dad's bank accounts.* To show separate ownership, the apostrophe and s go after each person or thing that has ownership. In this instance, mom and dad each have their own, separate bank accounts.
2. **For contractions**. *Can't, won't, shouldn't, don't,* and so on.

Ellipses

The main use of ellipses is to show that information has been

extracted from a quote. Perhaps it's a long quote, and there is more information or detail given in certain parts than necessary for your own purposes. An ellipse can be used in place of that information, indicating to readers that words were removed from the original quote. Importantly, the quoted information must still be grammatically correct. It's also important not to remove words that are important to the original meaning of the quote. You don't want to distort the original meaning or take words out of context.

- *According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, "Just as with other languages, specific ways of expressing ideas in ASL vary as much as ASL users themselves. In addition to individual differences in expression...ASL has regional variations in the rhythm of signing, pronunciation, slang, and signs used."*
- Note: Use a fourth period if it's at the end of a sentence to mark the period.

Brackets

Similar to ellipses, brackets are used primarily with quoted information, but instead of being used to remove information, brackets are used to add information that would help readers understand the quote. Bracketed information often clarifies a word or phrase.

- Sometimes the bracketed information is in addition to the word or phrase it clarifies: *He [Trent] was a lot taller than expected.* In this example, "Trent" clarifies the pronoun "he," in case readers don't know who the referent is.
- The bracketed information can also replace the unclear word or phrase: *[Trent] was a lot taller than expected.*
- The word "*sic*" is sometimes put in brackets in the middle of a

quote to show there is an error in the original quote. *Their [sic] are instructions inside the box.*

- Additionally, ellipses are often put in brackets to indicate that the author inserted them when a quote also includes ellipses as part of the original text.

Quotation Marks

Quotation marks have three primary uses:

1. **To emphasize particular words**: *To be marked "present" in class, you must not only be physically present but also pay attention and participate.*
2. **To indicate that information is being quoted verbatim from another source**. If you paraphrase information, putting the key ideas into your own words, then quotation marks aren't necessary.

   - *According to the Mayo Clinic, "In heart valve disease, one or more of the valves in your heart doesn't work properly."*
   - **Note**: If there is a quote within a quote, that internal quote should be set off by single quote marks: *Gary said, "I don't understand what the professor meant when she said, 'The essay must be at least five pages of content.'"* In this example, Gary is being quoted, but he quotes the professor.
   - **Another note**: In American English, the endmark will usually go inside the quotation marks, especially periods and commas. For questions, it depends on whether the original quote was a question. If so, the question mark should go inside the quotation marks. If not, it should go outside. A colon, semicolon, or em dash should also go outside.

3. **To mark the title of a short work**. Short stories, poems, newspaper articles, chapter titles, and web page titles are put in quotation marks. For instance, "The Yellow Wallpaper" or "The Road Not Taken" are titles of short works that require quotation marks. Longer works, such as books, journals, newspapers, movies, television shows, and so on are italicized.

Parentheses

Parentheses are typically used to identify information that is an aside to the information in the original sentence. As opposed to information enclosed in em dashes (for emphasis) or commas (of equal importance), parentheses show information that is of lesser importance in the sentence.

- Example: *We always have Easter with my grandma (my dad's mom).*
  - **Note**: If the parenthetical is only part of a full sentence, the period should go on the outside. If the parenthetical is a full sentence by itself, then the period goes inside. For example: *Conferences will be held in the biology lab. (The lab is located on the third floor of Blaine Hall.)*
  - **Another note**: Parentheses are also used in academic writing to indicate source information. Different citation styles have different formats, but the period always goes after the parentheses.

Activity 18.3

Fix the punctuation errors in the following sentences. (Some sentences have more than one error.)

1. While you are at the store could you pick me up shampoo; deodorant; and toothpaste?
2. I don't think I'll be able to make it to class today my roommates' alarm didn't go off and I'm running late.
3. The main characters in the play were the mother, Amanda, the son, Tom, and the sister, Laura.
4. The problem with having back to back classes is that I don't have time for lunch.
5. The professors' syllabus clearly states, "No food or drinks are allowed in the classroom".

Try writing your own sentences with punctuation errors, and switch with someone else to make corrections.

Conciseness

Digital writing is known for being concise. While academic writing is often a little more developed, social media posts, blog articles, and emails should be more to the point to engage readers and enhance readability. This is different from the grammar and punctuation rules that we noted above because being wordy isn't exactly an "error." What's more, there are some instances in which a few extra words will enhance the meaning or develop the tone of a piece in a positive way. Being as concise as possible isn't a rule, but it will often make your writing clearer and more effective. Below are some basic guidelines for concise writing.

- **Avoid redundancies and unnecessary information.**
  - ○ Instead of: I *will be out on vacation beginning on April 7,* *which is the day I leave. I'll be returning back to the office on* *April 15.*
  - ○ Revised: I *will be out on vacation from April 7–April 14.*
- **Use language that is straightforward and to the point**, eliminating language that is flowery or pretentious.
  - ○ Instead of: It *has been made known to me by my students* *that they will be away from campus for a period of several* *days due to a planned excursion with the business school.*
  - ○ Revised: *My students told me they will be on a field trip with* *the business school for several days.*
- **Write in an active instead of passive voice.** As demonstrated in the grammar section above, active voice is not only more straightforward, but it's also more concise.
  - ○ Instead of: The entire plate of spaghetti was eaten by me.
  - ○ Revised: I ate the entire plate of spaghetti.
- **Eliminate wordy phrases and unnecessary prepositional phrases.**
  - ○ Instead of: We *are taking the dog for a walk in the park near* *the center of town later this afternoon, around 4 p.m.*
  - ○ Revised: We *will take the dog for a walk in the park this* *afternoon.*
- **Avoid sentences that begin with "there is," "there are," or "it is."**
  - ○ Instead of: *There are many different species of birds in* *Indiana.*
  - ○ Revised: *Many different species of birds dwell in Indiana.*
- **Replace phrases with more precise words.**
  - ○ Instead of: *When he walked, he scuffed his heels along the* *surface of the ground.*
  - ○ Revised: *He shuffled his feet as he walked.*
- **Turn double negatives into positive phrases.**

- Instead of: *Our office won't see patients who don't have an appointment.*
- Revised: *Our office only sees patients with an appointment.*
- **Replace "to be" verbs + a gerund with a simple verb.**
  - Instead of: I *am looking for a car with low mileage.*
  - Revised: I *want a car with low mileage.*
  - Instead of: *Residents shouldn't be parking their cars in the street.*
  - Revised: *Residents shouldn't park in the street.*

Activity 18.4

Rewrite the following sentences to make them more concise.

1. Another irritating thing that upsets me deeply is the fact that so many people were laid off right before the Christmas holiday.
2. Hopefully, in the future, with these improvements, workflows will be completed more efficiently by the employees who work here.
3. There are many different ways to evaluate the quality of a written literary analysis essay and whether it effectively does all of the things it's supposed to do.
4. In our study group, we will be watching different tutorials and seeing how we can apply what we learn to our own assignments.
5. It is imperative and absolutely necessary at this stage of the onboarding process that our newly hired

employees begin familiarizing themselves with the employee handbook and all of the guidelines therein.

Try writing your own wordy sentences, and switch with someone else to make their sentences more concise.

A Helpful Use of Generative AI

You're probably familiar with the limitations of generative AI. It's often inaccurate, providing hallucinated content that is false or misleading (Nah et al.), and there are concerns that because the data sets that are used to train AI machines are biased, the generated content will be biased as well, perpetuating stereotypes related to race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on (Knapton). What's more, AI-generated text doesn't always flow very naturally, nor does it always attend to the rhetorical situation and the more "human" aspects of dialogue. All of that is to say that you probably shouldn't use generative AI to complete writing tasks for you, especially if it's a writing project that you've been assigned by a boss or a client. The expectation is that you will be the one creating the content, and it would make you and potentially your company look bad if there are problems with the content.

However, there are other ways that you can use generative AI in ethical and helpful ways. For instance, it can help with topic brainstorming. If you're given a topic or an assignment, but you're not sure how to focus that topic, putting a prompt into a program like ChatGPT can be useful in coming up with ideas that you could pursue. It can also be used to help you organize your ideas into an outline or provide example templates of a particular genre that

you're not familiar with so you can get a sense of how you might format your own text.

It can also be used for revising and editing your work. For instance, you can input a sentence or a paragraph that you have created, and ask ChatGPT how you can make it better. It might give you suggestions regarding organization or clarifying vague words. Or it might help you identify grammar, punctuation, and spelling mistakes that you missed. This article gives more suggestions for ways that generative AI can be used to improve your writing by attending to things like tone, sentence structure, organization, creativity, and more (DeAlmeida).

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19. Final Thoughts

We live in a digital world. Many of us wake up in the morning to an alarm we set on our smartphone, and from that moment on, so many of our daily activities revolve around technology: the weather and news updates that we get from Alexa, the podcast or Pandora station we listen to on our way to work, the text messages and emails that we respond to throughout the day, the social media posts that we read on our breaks, the projects we complete on our computers, the meetings we have on Zoom, the Netflix shows we watch as we unwind before bed. It would be an interesting, if not slightly disturbing, experiment to document how much digital media you consume each day—how much time you spend, which platforms you use, and what types of activities you do. More disturbing yet, consider how difficult it would be to navigate your daily life without digital media. What would your day look like if you didn't have a smartphone or a laptop or continual access to the internet?

While this textbook has demonstrated the ubiquitous nature of digital technology in various ways and the significant opportunities that come with the ability to easily access and share information, there are significant and complex skills that come with effective digital writing, and unfortunately, the important nuances are often overlooked. In fact, for many of us, composing text messages, emails, social media posts, and even blog articles has become such a common practice in our everyday lives that we often fail to recognize the larger rhetorical, social, and cultural implications of our writing. That's not to say that every text message you write has profound consequences. However, more often than not, the deeper purpose goes beyond sharing a funny GIF or letting a friend know you're running late. When you think about the underlying goals of each message (whether composed using digital media or not), some of your writing strategies and anticipated

audience reactions come into focus, helping you make effective choices. What's unique about digital media is its immediacy, its constant presence in our lives, and the range of communication strategies that are at our disposal. It's also much harder to control the spread of digital information once it's been published. All of these aspects of digital writing demand a higher level of intentionality, critical thinking, and social awareness, which is why so much of this textbook focuses on the critical and rhetorical perspective of digital writing (the "why" and "to what effect") in addition to the functional perspective (the "how to").

As digital technologies continue to evolve, the "how to" will probably change. New features and entirely new platforms will inevitably take the place of older versions, and there will be a learning curve with each one. Chances are that you'll also encounter new, specialized technologies as you advance in a particular field, and it may take time for you to learn how to navigate each one with confidence. What won't change are the underlying principles of critical and rhetorical literacy that can be applied in each new circumstance and help guide the choices you make. The hope is that the tools you learned in this textbook will be relevant again and again as you participate in digital spaces, both now and in the future.

In this final chapter of the book, we'll briefly explore the significant benefits that coincide with digital literacy. You might recall that in the first chapter of the book, we debunked the idea of the digital panacea, opting instead to understand both the affordances and constraints of various tools as well as the negative social, emotional, and cognitive effects that are often overlooked or dismissed. While those negative effects are legitimate and should be an important consideration as you think critically about the digital technologies you use and set appropriate boundaries, being intentional to monitor and evaluate your practices will not only enhance your writing but have significant personal benefits that extend far beyond a single text or digital platform:

- **Enhanced communication.** Of course, nothing can replace in-person conversation, where you can attend more fully to things like inflection, tone, and body language. However, digital technology has vastly expanded how and with whom you can communicate. Email, text messaging, social media, and web platforms make it possible for you to quickly and easily communicate information with a large number of people and to communicate at your convenience throughout your day. Also, while in-person communication might be more personal and flow more naturally, there are some important advantages of digital communication. For instance, messages that are more informational or detail-oriented can be organized around bullet points or numbered lists so readers can easily follow along and refer back to the message as needed. It's easier to incorporate pictures, tables, and charts that enhance the message. There's also more time to process the information you receive and formulate an appropriate response.
- **Forged connections.** Think of all the relationships that wouldn't exist or that would be much more difficult to maintain without digital media. Some relationships function exclusively online. Facebook groups, online support groups, and video game clans are just a few examples of online communities that can provide meaningful interactions among group members, perhaps from different states or even continents, allowing them to develop relationships and nurture certain aspects of their identity. Other groups might communicate online as a supplement to in-person activities, providing a consistent and convenient way to connect in between meetings. Even one-on-one relationships between spouses, parents and children, friends, coworkers, and so on can easily connect through digital media when an in-person conversation or even a phone call isn't feasible.
- **Personal growth.** If nurtured in the right way, your online engagement with diverse groups of people, with an endless body of information, with various perspectives and forms of

expression can go a long way to develop your own worldview, expanding not only your basic knowledge of concepts and events but of other people and experiences far different from your own. To thoughtfully engage with these ideas cultivates more self-awareness and more understanding and empathy for others.

- **Professional advancement.** The last unit of this textbook focused on the professional opportunities that exist within digital media—as analysts, SEO experts, content strategists, web designers, social media coordinators, and more. Employers consistently advocate for workers who can communicate effectively on a number of platforms, and chances are that whatever professional field you enter, it will require at least some form of digital writing. However, as more organizations seek to have an omnichannel presence and to make genuine connections with their target market, the ability to craft effective messaging across a variety of platforms will significantly increase your value at work and create more advancement opportunities.

- **Civic engagement.** Last but not least, digital technology can have a positive impact on your civic engagement, not only because it's easier and quicker to stay apprised of the latest national and local news, but also because digital platforms provide the opportunity to spark (hopefully) constructive dialogue, rally support around key issues, organize events, and prompt action. As discussed earlier in the text, it's not uncommon for digital spaces to become "toxic" with personal agendas and rhetoric of divisiveness, but opportunities can and do exist to identify tangible needs and to use digital tools to inform, to unite, and to affect positive change.

The common thread among the benefits listed above is intentionality—being intentional to engage in meaningful, fulfilling, and positive digital writing activities, setting healthy boundaries, and being able to identify and avoid digital spaces and activities that

are harmful or destructive. True digital literacy means being able to self-monitor and self-regulate. It's a habit of mind that promotes curiosity, critical thinking, and continual reflection, all of which create a feedback loop to inform your decisions about which technologies to engage with and how you will engage with the people you encounter. As the digital realm continues to expand, we are in desperate need of writers who are intentional and thoughtful about the messages they share and the way their words will affect different audiences on the other side of the screen.

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