"THERE ARE NO RULES. AND HERE THEY ARE": SCOTT MCCLOUD'S *MAKING COMICS* AS A MULTIMODAL RHETORIC

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Kathleen Blake Yancey noted in her 2004 Chair's Address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), "Literacy today is in the midst of a tectonic change," a change that involves ways of composing and reading that go beyond alphabetic literacy (298). The ways we read and compose and, more importantly, the ways our students read and compose (especially outside of school), have become multimodal, involving not only word, but also images, sounds, video, spatial relationships, gestures, and other systems of signs through which meaning can be created. In other words, as Jennifer Sheppard recently argued, "It is no longer sufficient to think exclusively of written language as a means for composing rhetorically effective communications" (44). As English teachers, then, we must broaden our views of what constitutes writing. We must address issues of not only alphabetic literacy but also multimodal literacy—the means by which we compose and read meaning from and through multiple modes or sign systems. Since they are multimodal texts, comics can, in general, have an important place in such a shift in thinking, and a text such as Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* can, specifically, act as a flexible rhetorical framework for multimodal literacy. Before I get into McCloud's work and its applicability to the classroom in more detail, let me

briefly delve into the idea of multimodality and its relation to comics.

Without a doubt, the concept of multimodality is already important in many first-year writing programs across North America; the 2006 article "Integrating Multimodality into Composition Curricula: Survey Methodology and Results from a CCCC Research Grant" details some of the ways that "educators have begun experimenting with multimodal compositions, compositions that take advantage of a range of rhetorical resources—words, still and moving images, sounds, music, animation—to create meaning" (Ankerson et al. 59). As can be seen in this article, Sheppard's article, and Yancey's CCCC Chair's address, the focus of this movement towards multimodality has primarily been in the realm of digital composing and at the intersections of computer technology and the teaching of writing. This does not, however, have to be the case, nor should it be; multimodal texts such as comics (and magazines and newspapers and billboards and so on) exist as part of students' worlds and as such we should take advantage of them as we help students develop their multimodal literacies through a range of texts. After all, as the National Council of Teachers of English Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies stresses, "An exclusive emphasis on digital literacies is not what most advocates of technology-rich composition advocate. Such an emphasis would limit students' access to other modes of expression" (np). Comics provide just such a mode of expression, another way into multimodal literacies that can both stand alone and complement digital literacies.

Like other multimodal texts, comics form a multifaceted environment in which meaning is negotiated between comics creators and comics readers. The comics page is highly complex, "with its patchwork of different images, shapes and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable" (Hatfield xiv). The negotiation of meaning, then, starts with the layout of the page itself, separated into multiple panels, divided

from each other by gutters that are both physical and conceptual spaces through which connections and meanings are made. Through these gutters, readers make connections between panels in which images of people, objects, animals, and settings, word balloons, lettering, and sound effects are contained. All of these elements come together to create meaning in distinctive ways and through multiple modes, including visual, linguistic, gestural, spatial, and audio (as represented through use of word balloons and sound effects). All of these modes are essential to the creation and reading of comics, and all are implicated in McCloud's guide to creating comics.

Comics thus add another dimension to the digital texts that are regularly put forward in discussions of multimodality and can be used as texts that link traditional alphabetic literacies with the newer digital literacies. Further, they are texts that carry a relatively low monetary cost, especially when compared with the use of digital technologies in the classroom. Moreover, as Michael Bitz writes in *When Commas Meet Kryptonite: Classroom Lessons from the Comic Book Project*,

> comics are more closely aligned with traditional educational materials than most other popular media – much more so than videogames, trading cards, or popular music. In the context of new media and literacies, comics are a rare bridge between the canon of reading skills that children are expected to master in school and the literacies that they embrace on their own and out of school.(11)

Such thinking is in line with the *NCTE Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies*. After all, one its central tenets states that "From an early age, students are very sophisticated readers and producers of multimodal work. They can be helped to understand how these works make meaning, how they are based on conventions, and how they are created for and respond to specific communities or audiences" (np). That is, as teachers, we can build on the kinds of reading and writing that students are already doing

outside of school and the literacies they are acquiring through these activities. Comics can act not only as this kind of bridge between students' literacies outside of school and the literacies expected of them inside school, but also as a bridge between alphabetic literacies and digital literacies.

Developing a Framework for Teaching Multimodal Rhetoric

By beginning where students are and embracing, rather than resisting, the literacies they bring to the classroom from their lives outside of school, we can productively engage with ideas of situated practice and overt instruction, part of a pedagogical model of engaging multimodal literacies first advanced by the New London Group in work such as "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." In summarizing these concepts in the very useful review article "Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms," Carey Jewitt writes,

> The starting point is that of the students and a focus on *situated practice* based on the learners' experiences. Situated practice involves the immersion in students' experiences and the designs available to them in their life worlds. *Overt instruction* is the key pedagogic strategy through which students are taught metalanguages of design, that is, the systematic and explicit teaching of an analytic vocabulary for understanding the design processes and decisions entailed in systems and structures of meaning. (248-49)

By focusing on students' engagement with all types of multimodal texts (including comics and magazines, as well as digital environments) and the situated practice of those experiences, teachers can have multiple entry points into teaching multimodal literacies. Such scaffolding of overt instruction on to the multimodal literacies of students' daily lives outside of school links the acquisition of literacies ("a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of

trial and error, without a process of formal teaching") to learning ("a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching . . . involv[ing] explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into its analytic parts") (Gee 32). In both the learning and acquisition of multimodal literacies, Design is the key concept because it represents the ways in which people actually engage with multimodal texts.

Design, a term I borrow from the New London Group, is a largely subconscious process that students undertake constantly in order to engage with the texts that surround them, but which teachers can better help them to understand through overt instruction and analysis of the choices and decisions that underlie the reading and composing of multimodal texts. That is, students may have no problems using their multimodal literacies to read comics, but through overt instruction, teachers can help students develop the metacognition necessary to read more critically and to express themselves through multimodal composition. Let's, then, briefly examine this concept of Design as it relates to multimodal texts in general and comics in particular.

As we read or write multimodal texts we encounter up to six Design elements, including linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial modes, as well as multimodal design representing the intersections of the other modes. According to the New London Group, Design—the process of reading and/or writing multimodal texts—consists of three elements: Available Design, Designing, and the Redesigned. Available Design includes the resources that a person brings to bear in creating or reading multimodal texts. When we engage in the process of Designing in our encounters with multimodal texts, we take these available resources and use them to create meanings that are then incorporated in what is called the Redesigned. The Redesigned feeds back into the continuous loop of Available Design as it provides new available resources for design for the next time we encounter multimodal texts. Through constant exposure to multimodal texts, students continually accumulate available resources for Design; this is the process of acquisition that is key

to performance and being able to interact with these texts effectively within the context of use. Adding explicit instruction—helping students to see the way Design works and the constant decisions and choices that are made as we compose and read multimodal texts—moves students towards a deeper understanding of their multimodal literacies. In such an understanding, students greatly increase their available resources for Design, especially in the realm of composing. By helping students to become self-conscious about the process of Design in creating multimodal texts, teachers can help students to think about the rhetorical choices made in Design and about the effects of those choices on their intended audiences. In other words, through overt instruction and learning, students can increase their rhetorical flexibility and facility in engaging in multimodal composition.

Texts such as Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* provide the kind of flexible rhetorical framework that is well suited to helping students realize these connections and become more adept at controlling their multimodal literacies as both composers and readers. Written in the comics form about which it aims to advise, *Making Comics* provides the reader with a flexible framework for making choices about creating one's own comic. It is in focusing on the concept of choice that I believe McCloud has created a multimodal rhetoric suitable for thinking about multimodal composing in general. Adding a text such as this one to students' available resources for design provides them with a framework that will allow them to better approach multimodal composing across a spectrum of rhetorical situations.

In the introduction to *Making Comics*, McCloud claims of comics that "There are no limits to what you can fill that blank page with—once you understand the principles that all comics storytelling is built upon. In short: there are no rules. And here they are" (5-6). Here McCloud both continues his argument that comics is a medium that is capable of virtually any kind of communication (first stated in *Understanding Comics*) and claims that there is a set of principles that must be mastered in order to

effectively engage in these acts of communication. Through McCloud's explanation of what he calls the "five choices"—choice of moment, frame, image, word, and flow—he seeks to demonstrate to the reader (and would-be comics creator) how the various multimodal elements within a comic can come together to create clarity and reader comprehension. These principles, existing as they do in the nebulous space between rules and no rules, provide a set of habits of mind that are always attuned to changes in the specific rhetorical context.

Such a focus aligns well with the kind of pedagogical approach put forth by Jody Shipka in "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing." Writing of the kinds of multimodal work handed in by students in her courses, Shipka argues that "the rhetorical, material, methodological, and technical choices students made while engineering these complex rhetorical events merit serious and sustained attention" (282). By focusing on the notion of choice, we can work towards helping students develop the kind of rhetorical flexibility that will allow them to engage with a wide variety of rhetorical situations as they think through the contexts and purposes of the work they produce. In doing so, students can become ever more conscious about what they are doing and why as they work with multiple sign systems to create meaning and achieve their communicative goals. In delineating these choices, McCloud provides Composition teachers with a flexible and practical rhetoric that outlines the available means for communicating through the comics medium in particular and through multimodal texts in general. Using such a text acts as a kind of overt instruction that links to students' own situated practice, giving them a meta-language for thinking through what they are already doing and giving them the resources to see what else might be possible.

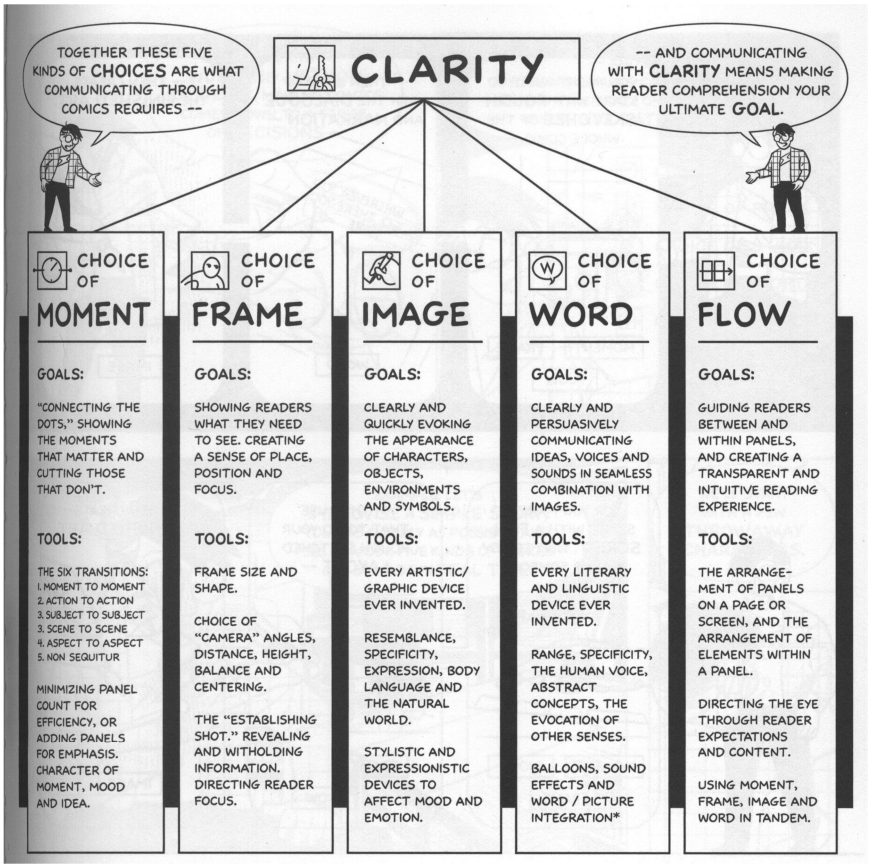

Figure 1: Five Kinds of Choices

As can be seen in Figure 1, McCloud argues that "Together these five kinds of choices are what communicating through comics requires—and communicating with clarity means making reader comprehension your ultimate goal"; later in the book, McCloud adds that the comics creator should have two goals: "You want readers to understand what you have to tell them—and you want them to care" (37, 53). Though we could debate whether clarity should be the ultimate goal of composing and exactly how meaning is negotiated between writer and reader within a textual space, it is clear that McCloud's approach is one that is highly rhetorical, though he would likely not call it that himself. Here the choices represent the available means of

persuasion (and communication) within the comics medium, which McCloud constantly reminds us need to be directed towards a purpose or goal that involves an audience. In the panel immediately after this chart, McCloud emphasizes that "these aren't 'steps' that have to be taken in any predetermined order. Most comics artists juggle all five as needed." In other words, the choices or available means are used flexibly depending on the rhetorical situation, a pedagogical approach in line with what Michèle Anstey and Geoffrey Bull suggest in *Teaching and Learning Multiliteracies*. They write, "literacy pedagogy must teach students to be flexible . . . [so that they are] able to identify the knowledge and resources they have and combine and recombine them to suit the particular purpose and context" (18). There are no "rules" that pertain the same way in every situation, but neither are there "no rules" since there are clearly principles that can be used across multiple contexts of communication. Before moving on to multimodal texts in general, I want to explore how these choices operate in the comics medium and how these choices are connected to a multimodal approach to comics.

Let's begin with the choice of moment, which, according to McCloud, involves "showing the moments that matter and cutting those that don't" (37). Seen in one way, then, the choice of moment is wrapped up in the nature of sequential art as one decides which panels will form the comic's narrative, the meaning of which is composed multimodally through the visual mode (drawing), the linguistic mode (words in both captions and word balloon), the gestural mode (the facial expressions and body language of the characters, both represented through drawing), the audio mode (sound effects and intonations of speech, both represented through drawing), and the spatial mode (the way the panels are arranged on the page and, thus, the way they relate to each other). Seen in another way, however, McCloud's choice of moment demands that the writer think about what to put in to a text and what to leave out, decisions that are important in the composition of any type of text. McCloud's choice of word is the closest to our conceptions of alphabetic literacy and is firmly

rooted in the long rhetorical tradition of using language to persuade and communicate. The major question here is what words should one choose to most effectively reach one's goals? However, since these words are situated within a multimodal text, their meaning is also made in relation to their interaction with the other elements of the text. McCloud makes this point explicit when he names the tools within this category of choice as not only linguistic and literary devices, but also "balloons, sound effects and word/picture integration" (37). In terms of multimodal theory, even the choice of word is enmeshed in a complex relationship with several other modes, including the audio (sound effects and word intonation as represented through lettering, shape of word balloons, and other visual cues), the visual (in the way the words interact with the images within a panel—McCloud's idea of word/picture integration), the gestural (in the way characters facial expressions and body language affect the way the words are read and understood), the spatial (in the placement of the words on the page and within the panel), and the multimodal (in the way all of these elements work together to create meaning). Such considerations about the way that words might interact with the other elements are of crucial importance to anyone composing a multimodal text.

Similarly, the choice of image, a primarily visual mode that asks creators to consider the best pictures to most effectively move towards one's purpose, is connected to the audio (in that the way words and sound effects are presented visually affects the way they are "heard" and understood), the gestural (in that body language and facial expressions are represented pictorially), the spatial (in that we understand the images partially by their relationship to each other on the page), the linguistic (especially through McCloud's idea of word/picture integration), and the multimodal. Choice of frame relates primarily to spatial (including frame size and shape, as well as shot composition) and visual (including shot composition, distance, and angle) modes, but it is apparent that the choices made in this regard affect the choice of word and image and thus the other multimodal elements

(linguistic, audio, and gestural). Choice of flow is, again, primarily spatial in that it involves page layout and how to effectively guide the reader "between and within panels [in order to create] a transparent and intuitive reading experience" (37). However, McCloud himself points to its inherent multimodality by emphasizing that the choice of flow uses "moment, frame, image, and word in tandem" (37). These five choices must work together as the writer thinks through the complex issues of multimodal composition, always keeping in mind the purpose and audience of the piece within this particular rhetorical context. Just as McCloud demands of comics creators, we need to ask our students, what choices are you making when you compose and why?

The Public Service Announcement: McCloud's Choices in Action

What, then, are some of the ways that McCloud's ideas can be used in the writing classroom? After discussing McCloud's ideas about the five choices, we could have students bring short comics texts into the classroom, whether from newspapers, magazines, or the web (see below for a full discussion of such a short comics text). By applying McCloud's ideas to these texts—whether in small groups or as a full class—students will begin to understand how they read, developing the metacognition necessary for the development of rhetorical knowledge, as well as critical thinking and reading. If we ask students to read like writers and think about the purposes, audiences, and strategies used in these comics texts, they should be able to transfer such thinking to their own composing. As a transition to the multimodal composing assignment that I will describe momentarily, McCloud's choices can be used as the basis of a revision activity that both focuses on the rhetorical choices made when composing and makes linkages for students between alphabetic and multimodal composing.

One way to begin engaging with multimodal literacies is to ask students to bring in one of the pieces of (alphabetic) writing that they are revising for class. First ask them to read through the piece, thinking about their current audience and purpose in writing the piece. Then ask them to imagine that they are going to develop the idea as a comics text. Have them begin by writing about their audience and purpose for this new text. Will it be the same? Different? Why? From there have them determine a moment from which to begin a draft of their comics text. With this moment in mind, ask students to begin to compose a comics text that is directed at their newly determined audience and towards their newly determined purpose. How will they begin to frame this moment? How many panels should they use? What will be included in each panel? What images will they choose? What words? How will the panels be arranged on the page? How will all of these elements work together? Students should be encouraged to use a mix of writing about these elements *and*, at the very least, to sketch out a thumbnail of their comics text. Artistic ability does not matter and stick figures are perfectly acceptable; what's important is to get students to think about composing through the lens of McCloud's rhetoric. The choices each student makes can then be discussed either in small groups or with the larger class in order to more fully develop these possibilities. The ideas generated by students as they work on this comics text can be used as the basis for a more fully developed multimodal text and/or to re-vision the original alphabetic text.

From these initial forays into multimodal composing, students are then prepared to move on to an assignment that is fully multimodal in its conception. One useful type of writing for introducing students to multimodal composition is the Public Service Announcement (PSA), a genre that our first-year writing program at the University of Windsor has been using for the past seven years. In order to take advantage of what comics have to offer as multimodal texts and to use McCloud to best advantage, one way to begin is by having the class examine a PSA in comics form. One such text, "Are You a Silent Witness?" (see Figure 2)

written by Jack Schiff and drawn by Sheldon Moldoff, is a PSA in comics form that appeared in various DC comics in April 1965 (and was featured on the website Polite Dissent in October of 2007). By starting with this type of PSA, the applicability of

Figure 2

McCloud's ideas from *Making Comics* becomes immediately apparent to students, creating a base of knowledge that adds to their available resources for design. These new Available Designs are then in place as they move on to reading PSAs in other media and to creating their own PSAs in a variety of media. I might begin by asking students to identify the creator's choice of moment. As I emphasized earlier, the idea of choice of moment is wrapped up in the sequential nature of the comics medium and begins to get at the multimodal nature of the form; at the same time, choice of moment entails the choice of what to include and exclude in any text, whether multimodal or strictly alphabetic.

In Figure 2, we see six moments/panels that represent the situation in which the boys find themselves, the decision that faces them, and the outcome of that decision. Those moments are portrayed multimodally through drawings (visual), words (linguistic), gestures and body language (gestural), and the relationship of the panels to each other, especially in the way the reader is asked to create meaning through interpreting what happens in the gutter between panels (spatial). In this particular comic, Schiff and Moldoff have made the choice to include no sound effects and almost no use of lettering to indicate the sound and intonation of speech (the one exception is the italicized "You" in the title). From a discussion of choice of moment, then, can come a discussion of the use of, or decision not to use, multimodal elements, beginning with the question, what information do you get from each moment and how do you create this meaning? In other words, what information is coming from what mode and how do these modes combine to create overall meaning? For example, in panel one, the reader gets information from the visual (the car driving away, the man on the road, and the position of the boys), the linguistic (the dialogue spoken, which reinforces the visuals and adds a bit more information), the gestural (the prone body of the man who has been hit, the boy pointing at the car leaving the scene), and the relationship to the following panel (as we reinterpret the first panel in light of what we know from the second panel and the connections we have made between the two

panels through the space of the gutter). This discussion can then lead to (and will already be wrapped up in) McCloud's other four choices.

Choice of word has already come into play just in the first panel (as well as in the title). Why these words? How would the effect have been different if other words had been chosen? How do the words (or the linguistic element) interact with all of the other elements in the comic? Similarly, we see choice of image already coming up in the initial discussion of choice of moment. Why choose that particular image in panel one? Why that angle and shot composition? Why use a close-up shot in panel two? Why eliminate the background in this panel? What is the effect of these choices on the reader? How do these choices (and other choices of image) interact with the other multimodal elements to create meaning? In terms of choice of frame, we can ask students to think about the choice to use a fairly consistent panel size and shape and about choices regarding shot composition, distance, and angle, decisions that overlap with choice of image. We can think about what has been included in the frame and what has been excluded from the panel. Finally, we can ask students to think about choice of flow, or the overall layout of the page. This discussion is, in many ways, of primary importance from a spatial perspective, but, as McCloud notes, it is inextricably wrapped up with the other four choices and, thus, with decisions that must be made about all multimodal elements. Such a discussion can be overtly connected to ideas of Design so that students can see the ways in which they all have slightly different Available Designs, that they are individually and collectively engaging with the process of Designing as they read and discuss this comic, and that the results of this Designing will become the Redesigned, contributing back to the Available Designs that will be in place for the next time they engage with a text. McCloud's choices and multimodal theory thus provide mutually reinforcing ways to help students engage with the reading and writing of multimodal texts.

From a starting point such as this PSA in comics form, students can then move on to discuss other PSAs as they consider the kinds of choices that the creators have used to communicate and

persuade. This rhetorical reading of PSAs further augments students' Available Designs, giving them the tools to write their own PSAs. Reading and discussing a number of PSAs rhetorically—seeing how they have utilized the tools of multimodality and what choices have been made in their composition—push students to think critically about texts rather than passively consume them and to link the acts of reading and writing in productive ways. From reading and talking about how PSAs work as persuasive texts, students can move on to composing their own texts in this genre, exploring different forms and media as they think about the best way to achieve their purposes for their intended audiences. The use of McCloud's notion of the five choices, in combination with explicit attention to ideas of multimodality, allows for the kind of overt instruction that can help students to be more critical as they read texts and exercise greater control in the choices they make as they compose them.

Like Richard Selfe and Cynthia Selfe, who argue for the use of this genre in their article "'Convince me!': Valuing Multimodal Literacies and Composing Public Service Announcements (PSAs)," I see a number of advantages to using the PSA as an introduction to multimodal composing: they are persuasive pieces in which the purpose and audience are usually quite specific; they are focused on a single issue and lend themselves well to research; they can be composed in a variety of media and using a variety of tools; there are many examples that teachers and students can read together in order to see how they are put together. In asking students to undertake this assignment, I find the approach advocated by Susan Blau and Kathry Burak in *Writing in the Works* particularly useful. After students identify a community organization to imagine as their client, Blau and Burak suggest that students "[d]evelop a portfolio of three public service messages and one pitch letter introducing your work to this new client. Your aim is to serve your community by raising awareness of an issue, initiating a new behavior or attitude, or changing a behavior or attitude" (409). Such a formulation asks students to be flexible in the way they

approach their audience(s) and purpose(s), to think through a variety of options for conveying their ideas, to use the rhetorical strategies for multimodal composition they have discussed in class, and to articulate what they are doing in their multimodal PSAs and why. Through this combination of multimodal and alphabetic composing, students are pushed to be curious about a topic, open to new ways of thinking, engaged in their projects, persistent in their development of those projects, responsible for how their work will appear to their imagined client, flexible in their thinking about how to accomplish their goals, and metacognitive in their ability to reflect on and articulate their choices as they draft and revise their work. In other words, the PSA assignment is the kind of work that helps students develop the habits of mind outlined in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing Council*.

As students engage in the process of writing PSAs on subjects of their own choosing, we can encourage them to think about their purposes, audiences, and the constraints imposed in their particular contexts. Students might think about the following questions as they write their PSAs: What media would be appropriate/productive? What is possible within each medium? Why this choice of moment? Why did you include what you did? Why did you choose to use this specific combination of image, word, gesture, sound, and space to convey your ideas and persuade your audience? Why these specific words? Why these specific images? How do the two interact? How do gesture, sound, and spatial relationships connect to the choice of word and image? How have you decided to frame your choice of moment, word, and image? In your choice of flow, how have you decided to guide your reader through your text? How do the linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial elements come together as you make these choices? What is the most effective way to achieve your purpose for this audience, in this context, and given these particular constraints? What choice did you make and why?

In both the revision activity and the PSA assignment, students are encouraged to see the rhetorical knowledge necessary in both alphabetic and multimodal composition. Not only will such a

strategy contribute to students' Rhetorical Knowledge, one of the key elements of the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) *Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*, but it also contributes to many of the Statement's other outcomes by asking students to be more critical readers and writers, develop flexible processes for writing, think through the conventions involved in different kinds of composing, and compose in a variety of environments and modes. Moreover, the rhetorical strategies learned in reading and composing multimodal texts will support students' abilities to "compose in multiple environments" (Council of Writing Program Administrators). In other words, such an exercise helps students and teachers to work towards what is outlined in both the WPA *Outcomes Statement* and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council 2013).

Explicitly introducing McCloud's choices and theories of multimodality through both reading and writing provides a metalanguage for thinking about multimodal composing, a valuable resource for students as they make the kinds of choices outlined above. In order to ensure that students integrate these concepts into their Available Designs as fully as possible, it is important to get students to write reflectively about their processes of composing, using this metalanguage to discuss what they did and why. After all, as Shipka reminds us in "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing," "asking student to produce an account of their goals and choices reminds them of the importance of *assessing rhetorical contexts*, *setting goals*, and *making purposeful choices*" (288). Used in the ways I have discussed in this essay, Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* can thus act as a powerful multimodal rhetoric, offering students a flexible and powerful way of engaging with multimodal texts. By moving students through the kind of thinking, reading, and writing outlined here, we can help them to acquire the rhetorical flexibility necessary to engage with other multimodal genres as both consumers and producers.

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