

‘All Writing Is Multimodal’ By Cheryl Ball and Collin Charlton

Posted on October 17, 2019

Introduction

Cheryl Ball and Collin Charlton’s claim that “all writing is multimodal” challenges the belief that writing consists only of words arranged in sentences. Every text communicates through a combination of modes, including language, visual design, spatial arrangement, typography, sound, gesture, movement, and the material or digital technology through which it reaches an audience. The original response correctly recognizes that multimodality is not limited to digital media and that even a conventional essay uses margins, headings, spacing, font, and page organization. It also refers to Andrea Lunsford’s idea that writing is performative and to the related principle that writing responds to situations through recognizable forms. These concepts can be integrated into one argument: writers do not merely place information into neutral containers. They design performances for particular audiences, purposes, technologies, and genres. Understanding multimodality therefore improves both the analysis and production of academic, professional, civic, and creative writing. (Ball and Charlton 42–43)

What a Mode Is

A mode is a socially recognized resource for making meaning. Linguistic mode includes vocabulary, grammar, sentence pattern, and verbal tone. Visual mode includes image, color, contrast, line, and typography. Spatial mode concerns arrangement, proximity, sequence, white space, and navigation. Aural mode includes voice, music, silence, volume, and rhythm. Gestural mode includes facial expression, posture, movement, and interaction. These modes are not isolated channels that simply add independent messages. Their relationship matters. A bold heading directs attention to words; music can make spoken language feel urgent or reflective; the placement of an image can suggest whether it is evidence, decoration, or commentary. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Why Conventional Essays Are Already Multimodal

A printed research essay may appear primarily linguistic, yet readers interpret more than its sentences. A title indicates hierarchy. Paragraph breaks mark conceptual units. Quotation indentation signals another voice. Citation format identifies disciplinary membership. Page numbers, section headings, margins, and typeface help readers navigate and judge professionalism. A poorly designed essay can make a sound argument difficult to follow, while a clear layout can reveal relationships

among claims. Calling the essay multimodal does not mean that visual form is more important than evidence. It means that evidence is always encountered through designed features that influence access and interpretation. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Multimodality Is Not Synonymous With Digital Media

The original response correctly rejects the idea that multimodal texts must be digital. A poster, map, museum label, comic, brochure, stage performance, handwritten note, and illustrated book can combine modes without a screen. Digital technologies expand the available combinations through animation, hyperlinking, audio, video, interactivity, and responsive layout, but multimodality existed long before computers. Ancient inscriptions combined words, image, architecture, and public location. Medieval manuscripts used lettering, illumination, and page arrangement. Oral performance combined language, voice, gesture, and audience response. The digital age changes speed, scale, and remixability rather than inventing multimodal communication from nothing. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

The New London Group's Contribution

The New London Group used the concept of multiliteracies to describe communication in culturally and technologically diverse societies. Its framework recognized linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial design as resources that people use to make meaning. This approach shifted literacy education away from one standardized model of correct print toward analysis of how meaning changes across communities and media. The framework does not imply that every mode is equally effective for every purpose. It asks writers to understand the affordances and conventions of each mode. A chart may show comparison efficiently, while a paragraph may explain causation or uncertainty more carefully. (New London Group 60–92)

Affordances and Limitations

An affordance is what a mode or medium makes possible or easy. A still image can display spatial relation immediately, but it may conceal sequence or change. Audio can communicate emotion, accent, pace, and emphasis, but it is difficult to scan quickly without a transcript. Video combines movement and sound but can demand bandwidth, time, and visual attention. Written language supports detailed qualification and quotation, yet it may require greater reading effort. Effective design begins by matching affordances to purpose rather than adding media because it appears modern. (Ball and Charlton 42–43)

Writing as Performance

Andrea Lunsford's description of writing as performative emphasizes that writing does something in the world. A legal brief asks a court to decide. A laboratory report makes a result available for scrutiny. A complaint demands response. A social-media post constructs a public identity and invites circulation. A personal statement performs readiness and character for an admissions audience. The writer therefore makes choices about voice, timing, evidence, format, and delivery. Performance does not mean falseness. It means that communication is an action shaped by expectations, relationships, and consequences. (Lunsford)

The Writer's Ethos

Multimodal design contributes to ethos, the audience's perception of the communicator's credibility and character. Consistent citation, readable typography, accurate images, accessible captions, and restrained visual hierarchy can communicate care and competence. An overloaded presentation, manipulated photograph, confusing navigation, or decorative chart may undermine trust. Ethos is not created by appearance alone; polished misinformation remains misinformation. Design and evidence must support one another. The ethical writer does not use visual authority to disguise weak reasoning. (Lunsford)

Writing Responds to Situations

Writing is always situated. A writer faces an exigence or reason to communicate, an audience capable of responding, constraints, available genres, and a medium. A public-health warning during an emergency differs from a peer-reviewed epidemiological article because the audiences and required actions differ. The warning may prioritize direct language, icons, translation, and mobile readability. The article requires methods, limitations, references, and disciplinary detail. Neither is a simplified version of the other. Each is a designed response to a rhetorical situation. (Devitt)

Recognizable Forms and Genre

Genres are recurring forms of social action. A résumé, scientific article, obituary, memo, sermon, policy brief, and video tutorial are recognizable because communities have developed expectations about content, sequence, tone, and design. Genre helps readers know what to look for and helps writers coordinate action efficiently. It is not a rigid template. Genres evolve as technologies and institutions change. An online résumé may include links and portfolios; a news story may combine text, video, interactive graphics, and reader comments. Writers need to understand both the stability and flexibility of form. (Devitt)

Multimodal Composition as Design

Composition involves selecting, arranging, and revising modes. A writer creating a presentation must decide what belongs on slides, what should be spoken, what evidence needs visual representation, and what should be provided in a handout. Repeating a dense paragraph aloud while displaying it on screen wastes the affordances of both speech and visual design. A better design might show one diagram while the speaker explains its implications. Multimodal competence therefore requires planning relationships among elements, not merely collecting them. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Remediation

Remediation occurs when content is represented through a different medium or when one medium incorporates features of another. Turning a research paper into a podcast requires more than reading the paper aloud. Citations may need verbal framing, sections need transitions for listeners, and complex evidence may require an accompanying transcript or webpage. Converting an interview into an infographic demands selection and visual hierarchy. Meaning changes during remediation because audience experience, pace, and available context change. Writers should explain what was gained, lost, or transformed. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Visual Rhetoric

Images and layouts make arguments. Camera angle can increase or reduce perceived power. Cropping can remove context. Color can signal danger, calm, identity, or category. Scale can exaggerate differences in a graph. White space can create emphasis or suggest luxury. Visual rhetoric should be analyzed with the same seriousness as verbal claims. Viewers should ask who created an image, what is outside the frame, how data were selected, and which audience assumptions make the design meaningful. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Data Visualization

Charts are especially important examples of multimodal writing because they combine numbers, labels, position, shape, color, and explanatory prose. A graph can reveal trends that are difficult to see in a table, but it can also mislead through truncated axes, unequal intervals, excessive decoration, or inappropriate chart type. Writers must label units, identify sources, explain uncertainty, and make color choices accessible. The caption should state the interpretive point rather than merely repeat the title. Data visualization is therefore both analytical and ethical work. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Sound and Voice

Aural mode contributes pace, emphasis, emotion, pronunciation, and identity. In a podcast or video, pauses can create reflection and music can establish mood. These effects must be used carefully because emotional sound can manipulate perception beyond the evidence. Voice also carries accent and social judgment. A responsible classroom should not treat one standardized accent as the only credible voice. At the same time, speakers can learn techniques of volume, articulation, pacing, and structure that improve access without erasing identity. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Gesture and Embodied Communication

Presentations, interviews, classrooms, and video calls involve gesture. Eye contact, posture, movement, and facial expression influence how audiences interpret words. Gesture can reinforce, contradict, or complicate linguistic meaning. Cultural conventions differ, so one gesture may communicate approval in one context and insult in another. Writers working with performance should rehearse how verbal and bodily choices interact. Accessibility also requires avoiding assumptions that effective communication depends on one kind of body, gaze, or movement. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Spatial Design and Navigation

Spatial arrangement guides the reader through a text. Headings, menus, columns, buttons, hyperlinks, and page sequence establish paths. A website that hides essential information under several menus creates a rhetorical barrier. A poster viewed from a distance requires hierarchy different from a document read closely. Spatial design also affects interpretation: elements placed near one another appear related, while isolated elements receive emphasis. Writers should test whether readers can locate the purpose, evidence, and next action without already knowing the structure. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Technology Is Not Neutral

Writing technologies shape what can be composed, circulated, measured, and preserved. Social platforms favor particular image dimensions, character lengths, interaction metrics, and algorithmic priorities. Word-processing templates normalize certain page forms. Presentation software encourages slides and bullet points. These tools enable communication but also suggest habits. Critical writers ask which choices are built into a platform, whose interests those choices serve, and how they influence audience attention. Technology does not determine meaning completely, but it participates in rhetorical decisions. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Accessibility

Multimodal writing is effective only when audiences can access it. Images need meaningful alternative text. Videos need captions and often transcripts. Color should not be the only carrier of information. Documents require logical headings and readable contrast. Audio should be understandable without unnecessary background noise. Links need descriptive wording. Accessibility is not an optional repair added after design; it should guide composition from the beginning. Accessible design often helps everyone by making structure and purpose clearer. (Ball and Charlton 42-43; Bezemer and Kress)

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Multimodality allows writers to communicate across languages and cultural traditions, but visual or gestural forms are not universally transparent. Symbols, colors, reading directions, humor, and genre expectations vary. Translation must therefore include design and context, not only word substitution. Writers should research audiences, consult community members, and avoid using cultural forms as decoration detached from meaning. Multiliteracies recognizes difference as a resource while requiring ethical attention to power and representation. (New London Group 60-92)

Authorship and Collaboration

Multimodal projects often involve writers, designers, photographers, programmers, editors, speakers, and participants. Authorship becomes collaborative and distributed. Credits should identify contributions, and permissions should be obtained for images, music, data, and personal stories. Remix and quotation require attribution even when technology makes copying easy. Collaborative authorship can improve expertise and perspective, but teams need clear decisions about responsibility and consent. (Ball and Charlton 42-43; Bezemer and Kress)

Assessment of Multimodal Work

Teachers should not grade multimodal projects mainly on technical polish or expensive production. Assessment should focus on rhetorical effectiveness, evidence, organization, ethical sourcing, mode selection, accessibility, revision, and reflection. A student with limited software access should not be disadvantaged against someone with professional tools. Rubrics can ask whether each mode contributes meaning and whether the design suits audience and purpose. Students should explain their choices and limitations, making the composing process visible. (Ball and Charlton 42-43; Bezemer and Kress)

A Practical Composing Process

A useful process begins with the rhetorical situation: what change should the communication produce, who is the audience, and under what conditions will they encounter it? The writer then gathers evidence, studies relevant genres, selects modes, and creates a storyboard or prototype. Testing with representative users reveals navigation and accessibility problems. Revision should address both content and design. Final reflection identifies how modes work together and what would change for another audience or platform. This process treats multimodal writing as disciplined inquiry rather than decorative production. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress)

Conclusion

The statement that all writing is multimodal is not a claim that every text needs video, sound, or animation. It is a reminder that meaning is always shaped by language, form, material, arrangement, technology, and audience practice. Conventional essays use visual and spatial modes even when words remain dominant. Digital texts expand the available combinations but do not create multimodality from nothing. Lunsford's concept of writing as performance and the principle that writing responds through recognizable genres clarify why mode choices matter: communication is action within a situation. Writers who understand multimodality can analyze how texts guide attention, establish credibility, include or exclude audiences, and circulate through institutions. The goal is not to make every composition more elaborate. It is to make deliberate, ethical choices about which modes best support evidence, purpose, accessibility, and human understanding. (Ball and Charlton 42–43; Bezemer and Kress; New London Group 60–92)

Works Cited

Ball, Cheryl E., and Colin Charlton. "All Writing Is Multimodal." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015, pp. 42–43.

Bezemer, Jeff, and Gunther Kress. *Multimodality, Learning and Communication*. Routledge, 2016.

Devitt, Amy J. *Writing Genres*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

Lunsford, Andrea A. "Writing Is Performative." *Naming What We Know*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015.

New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, 1996, pp. 60–92.