# Chapter 11
# Visual Literacy, Rhetoric, and Design at the Graduate Level:
## Preparing Graduate Teaching Assistants to Teach Visual Literacy

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## ABSTRACT

*While much has been written about visual literacy and multimodal teaching, almost nothing has been published on preparing instructors and graduate teaching assistants to provide students with the mechanics of visual design, rhetoric, and cultural criticism to help them build complex, multimodal projects that go beyond visual inclusion and critique. This chapter focuses on a graduate course on visual literacy, rhetoric, and design that was taught by one of the authors and taken by the other four. Grounded in previous claims for visual literacy in the field, the authors open by introducing how and why students can be helped to develop visual arguments. It then introduces the graduate course, and 10 strategies for successful multimodal, project-based teaching, which are exemplified by graduate and undergraduate project examples. The chapter concludes with example assignments from two of the graduate authors and a call for a dedicated cross-disciplinary graduate course for multimodal pedagogy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Education should meet, in practical ways, the demands of living in a visual culture, and produce "the education that is necessary for our time" (McLuhan, 1964). Earlier pedagogies assumed that only certain kinds of "visual" assignments seemed possible within a writing course that used visual images as

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prompts for essay writing (George, 2002/2014). A more recent argument insists that millennial learners grew up with computers and are thus digital natives who possess a degree of visual literacy (Brumberger, 2011). In particular, Coats (2007) argues that this group is "the most visual of all learning cohorts" (p. 126). However, as Felten (2008) notes, "Living in an image-rich world . . . does not mean students . . . naturally possess sophisticated visual literacy skills, just as continually listening to an iPod does not teach a person to analyze critically or create music" (p. 60). To say, however, that visual literacy should be part of the undergraduate education does not determine where or when it should be introduced, nor how focused it should be on the mechanics of visual design, rhetoric, and cultural critique. Nor does it establish how or when instructors of these students should be provided the training to teach visual thinking and composing.

Washabaugh (2008) argues that "visual studies can operate most effectively at the undergraduate level . . . in a single mandatory general education course" (p. 129). This notion assumes, as many faculty assume about writing, that visual literacy can be taught one semester to provide students what they need to succeed for all subjects at all levels and in the workplace. This mistaken notion ignores 35 years of research in writing across the curriculum and builds on several misconceptions: 1) students have the ability to acquire skills of visual argument and cultural critique in a single semester that will transfer to all other meaning-making contexts; 2) faculty are willing and prepared to teach meaningful use of visual argument; and 3) scholars use visual evidence and arguments the same way for different purposes across disciplines. Similar to writing, visual literacy is an acquired set of strategies, ways of seeing, and making meaning. It is not intuitively acquired by most students, nor intuitively taught by most faculty. This chapter argues that teaching students only how to write academic discourse with no attention to visual or other multimodal literacies disadvantages them for courses they will encounter in their majors and in the workplace after they graduate. Furthermore, instructors of writing and speaking need to be taught how to teach multimodal composition.

Teaching composing and presentation across modalities is not without risks and challenges. Expecting students to develop aural, visual, and written abilities in a single course can be overwhelming, distracting, and even counterproductive. These expectations can be further problematic if instructors are no more prepared to teach these multiple literacies than their students are to produce them. Trying to teach or learn too many things at once can lead to broad exposure but limited success. To address these issues, this chapter focuses on a graduate course on visual literacy, rhetoric, and design that was taught by one of the authors of this chapter and taken by the other four. This course served as an introduction to project-based multimodal production and emphasized that visuality can be used as a way to help graduate students begin integrating such elements into their own classes. Furthermore, this chapter calls for a dedicated course on visual or multimodal pedagogy to help graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) develop fully integrated multimodal, project-based courses.

Grounded in previous claims for visual literacy in the field, this chapter opens by introducing how and why students can be helped to develop visual arguments. It then introduces the graduate course, decisions made to select texts, rationale for organizing them on the syllabus, and introduces 10 strategies for successful multimodal, project-based teaching, which are exemplified by graduate and undergraduate project examples. The chapter concludes discussing ways in which this work has influenced two of the graduate student authors' teaching.