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TCC Rough Draft

**Author’s Note: This document is a rationale of sorts for the theme 10803 course I’m teaching in the spring. Originally, the project was supposed to be a short rationale and an expanded syllabus, but the rationale turned into a significant piece that builds on the memo I submitted with my theme course proposal. This rationale will be going on a webpage on my digital portfolio, and so I included hyperlinks instead of traditional MLA citations. I feel it’s fairly comprehensive of what I’m thinking the shape of the course to be at this point. I will happily take any feedback you can provide, but particularly in regards to tone (I feel the tone may shift a few times throughout), areas that seem weak, confusing, or repetitive, and use of sources (are there enough sources? do any sections need bolstering with additional research?).**

**TL;DR Teaching Students Writing for Online Communities**

If you’re not a frequent Twitter or Reddit user, you may be unfamiliar with the internet parlance of “[TL;DR](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tl%3Bdr),” or “too long; didn’t read,” a notation that is usually followed by a summation of the too-long text. While this abbreviation is often appended to extensive personal stories posted on Reddit with a request for advice, it could often apply to many texts online that fail to take into account the constraints of the medium. Online writing is often read on a smartphone, attached to a tweet, or skimmed in a hurry. As such, those who consider online writing to be a cut-and-paste version of a traditional text miss out on the most effective ways to use digital genres. Web-based writing has its own genres, affordances, and appeal to audiences, yet so often those digital content creators do not always consider these elements. Surprise: these digital content creators are us. They are our students.

Use of the internet for information, communication, and self-representation is ubiquitous. Though the assumption that everyone, even in America, has access to the internet is a classist fallacy, most students who graduated from high school in recent years and are now accessing higher education are comfortable with—or even reliant on—the internet…but this familiarity rarely goes to the level of thoughtful and intentional production. A 2016 [Pew Research Poll](http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/) indicates at least half of those under 50 often get news from online sources. These online sources have a multitude of conventions and genres, and they speak to varied discourse communities that continue to multiply, as is abundantly evident with the research on [echo chambers](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/07/14/confirmed-echo-chambers-exist-on-social-media-but-what-can-we-do-about-them/?utm_term=.19099fb280e6). Students are often part of multiple online discourse communities—through social media pages, community-building websites, YouTube videos, and fandoms—though they do not stop to consider what being an ethical, responsible, and rhetorically-savvy member of those communities requires. They have not been taught to critically examine these communities, nor their participation in them.

Do students need to be taught these skills? Don’t they already possess them, since they do not recall a time before the internet? A frequently repeated argument is that current students are digital natives, perhaps their own [sub-generation](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/fashion/move-over-millennials-here-comes-generation-z.html?mcubz=1) due to their comfort with technology previously unavailable. At the same time, [studies](http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/d-brief/2017/07/27/20443/#.Wc5k04qQzdR) have shown that assumptions that Gen-Z students are better at engaging with technology and multi-tasking may be unfounded. Composition studies has been shouting for years that just because one learns to form letters in kindergarten, read words in elementary school, craft paragraphs in middle school, and craft essays in high school, does not automatically ensure that one is prepared for the level of writing and research required in college; hence the need for college composition courses. Literacy is a continual process. The same goes for digital literacies, a term which has been much debated and frequently defined (for starters, see this [article](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/09/what-is-digital-literacy.html) in *EdWeek* and the notes/resources section on the [“digital literacy”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_literacy) Wikipedia entry). In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age,* Stuart Selber identifies three forms of computer literacy that looks at how technology is used in functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies. Henry Jenkins and his colleagues at Project New Media Literacies identify elements of [new media literacies](http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/the-literacies/): play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, negotiation, and visualization.

Regardless of how these new literacies are characterized, [researchers argue](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/04/digital-natives-yet-strangers-to-the-web/390990/) that students “need to deeply, holistically, and realistically understand how the digital world works behind the scenes.” Students are engaging with (and frequently creating) online texts, but they may not be considering the intentionality required to create effective online writing. They may be not be aware of how genre, audience, and purpose shape their experience of those texts. By making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, this class seeks to make visible the invisible frameworks beneath all texts, particularly those online, which will give students the ability to identify and analyze genre conventions and audiences through a process of inquiry about digital spaces.

**10803 Learning Outcomes**

In this class, students use and analyze a variety of online genres and talking about their differences, meeting the first ENGL 10803 outcome of writing in a range of genres beyond predictable forms. We will also discuss the rhetorical situation, and use this knowledge to rhetorically analyze examples of these genres, which addresses various 10803 outcomes. Students will learn to balance their own voices with others’ voices, particularly in units 3 and 4 (see below for unit outlines). We will spend time discussing how to evaluate online sources, as well as writers’ responsibilities once they become one of those online sources. A key part of this course will be peer interaction both online and face-to-face, including peer review and response to each other’s work, as students revise and re-imagine various texts for different audiences.

**Online Portfolios**

In this course, students will be creating class portfolios through the simple website creator, Weebly. Each of the course’s assignments– a rhetorical analysis of personal online personas, a faux-Wikipedia entry, a profile of an online community, and a participatory project – will be published on this portfolio. While critiques of classes that require online portfolios point to the graveyard of abandoned webpages that litter the internet that are discarded once requirements of a class have been met. These pages are often buried under the billions of webpages online, never to be seen again, but they can be unearthed with an ultra-specific Google search. Regardless if students continue to produce content for their ENGL 10803 personal webpage or if they abandon it like they abandon any memory of the name of their instructor after the final day of class, they are still producing content that is public. Members of their discourse communities or the online communities which they wrote to or about may stumble upon their work in a few days or a few months, and students are responsible for the content they produce.

No longer will the teacher be the only audience for an assignment; instead, students will need to contend with the fact that their work could be read by an actual public. Part of this public will include the other members of the class and myself, but the audience may extend beyond us and include individuals who participate or have interest in the subjects about which the student will be writing. Students will need to navigate the ethics and responsibilities involved in being read by an actual public. As such, we will discuss issues of online privacy and ethics in each unit, as well as citation, sources, and fair use, hoping giving students the awareness that intentionality is key to online content.

A concern brought up by [Jack Dougherty](https://epress.trincoll.edu/webwriting/chapter/dougherty-public/) is how to navigate the tension between public writing and student privacy. Like me, Dougherty believes writing for a public audience is important, but he also acknowledges that students deserve some degree of ownership and privacy over their own words (particularly in regards to FERPA). His understanding is that he “*may* require students to post their writing in public as a course assignment (especially if [his] syllabus clearly states this in advance), but [he] *may not* require students to attach their names.” He also drafted a [privacy policy](http://commons.trincoll.edu/edreform/guides-and-resources/student-privacy/) which he appended to his syllabus (I plan to include a similar statement in my syllabus). While I plan to make abundantly clear in the early days of the course that students should not take my themed course if they are not comfortable posting their words and thoughts online, I also understand that there may be situations in which a student may want to take this course but have very real concerns about their privacy. As such, students will be able to take ownership of their own identification on the site, and they may take steps to conceal their identity in assignments (including the first assignment) in discussion with me.

**Unit Pattern**

Each unit will roughly follow the same pattern (though not necessarily in this exact order):

1. Introduction to the genre: discussion of purpose, audience, context, conventions
2. Whole class rhetorical analysis and discussion of genre example
3. Rhetorical analysis blog (RAB): students find their own examples and post analysis on their portfolios; classmates read and respond to three analyses; whole class discussion about samples/analyses
4. Invention/creation
5. Drafting
6. Peer review
7. Revision and publication

Each unit will require students to complete a RAB (rhetorical analysis blog) which will involve analyzing an example that the student finds of the genre we are focused on in that particular unit. These RABs will be posted on the student webpage (as will all of the other final unit assignments), and students will be required to read and comment upon three classmates’ RABs each unit, taking the discussion out of the classroom and providing students with the opportunity to both engage with each others’ work and see additional examples of the online genres.

Additionally, each draft of a unit’s project will include an author’s memo, in which students discuss the specific rhetorical choices they made for their projects. This reflection will be especially necessary in these online genres, as students struggle with how to engage in these formats, mediums, and conventions. They may try and be unsuccessful in their attempt to use this new genre, and their discussion of this “failure” in their author’s note will be key to my evaluation and their learning. This memo will not be posted to their public site; this will be a private place in which they can discuss the work they are doing and the process they have undertaken to compose these digital texts.

**Unit Progression**

Each unit of the course scaffolds on the one before. The students will move from personal inquiry to inquiry into a familiar community (where a student will write largely as an insider) to inquiry into an unfamiliar community (where a student will write largely as an outsider).

*Unit 1: Logging On*

In this initial unit, the students will set up their online portfolios through the simple web site creator Weebly. I will introduce the concept of genre, and we will begin to see how genres function online. We will discuss issues of privacy and identification, and we will go over the basics of web design. I will require that students have a standard menu, including a blog section and an “About Me” section. I will have my own blog that will be the landing page for the course, serving as both a model and a central hub for the rest of the sites. The “About Me” section will be the central focus of this short introductory unit, as students decide how to define themselves as writers, experts, and public personas.

*Unit II: Creating Avatars*

This unit combines personal inquiry with analysis, as students will analyze their online personas as rhetorically constructed. We will discuss rhetorical strategies, particularly logos, ethos, and pathos, as well as continuing our discussion about online security and privacy. Before delving into the person, students will complete a RAB on a celebrity’s social media page of their choice. Then, students will seek to discover who they are presenting themselves to be through their social media and online presence, consider how that persona may be effective (or ineffective) for particular audiences. Primarily, students will endeavor to articulate how they make the rhetorical choices they make on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and examine why they do what they do online. They will be required to provide visual proof of their findings, visuals from their own social media pages. Student identities may still be concealed in this project, if necessary (through blurred images and pseudonyms). If students do not use social media or have not composed an online persona, alternate projects may be arranged. The students will learn how to use rhetorical strategies to analyze both visual and textual components of their own making, learning something about themselves as online composers and appeals to public audiences in the process.

*Unit III: Becoming Wikipedia*

In this unit, after doing a RAB on a particular Wikipedia entry of their own selection, students will create a faux-Wikipedia page entry about something at TCU: a person, a place, an event. Other professors have had students edit or compose actual Wikipedia pages ([Graham](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12230987.0001.001/1:5/--writing-history-in-the-digital-age?g=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1#5.3), [Senier](https://epress.trincoll.edu/webwriting/chapter/senier/)), and while I appreciate the way that assignment would make real the idea of audience, I have not looked into Wikipedia page creation enough to feel comfortable assigning the work to my students. Also, keeping the subjects within the realm of TCU-related information will force the students’ focus to be narrow (narrower than Wikipedia often is) and allow there to be connections between the TCU Wikipedia sites that demonstrate the networking and interconnectedness of information on the web.

In their compositions of these entries, they will have to consider the Wikipedia Five Pillars, as well as evaluate the sources that they use to create their TCU Wikipedia page. I will ask them to hyperlink to sources, as well as hyperlink to each others’ pages, creating a web of TCU information. They will also practice citation, summary, and selection of information. Visuals will be an important component of these entries, so we will consider visual rhetoric and copyright issues. Overall, students will learn valuable information about research and intellectual property that will hopefully both inform their reading of Wikipedia pages and inform their other research and citation work outside of ENGL 10803.

*Unit IV: Finding Communities*

Henry Jenkins and his colleagues at Project New Media Literacies relate new media literacies to [participatory culture](http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/our-methods/), which allows individuals to become producers of public rhetorical work. Henry Jenkins says the internet has “the ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectator culture into participatory culture,” which means students need a wider understanding of primary research, interviewing, visuals, ethical representation, ethnography, visual rhetoric, larger significance, and evidence for claims (as qtd in Urbanski 5). Participatory culture can be a framework used to look at particular online communities, many of which are termed “fandoms.” As Joli Jenson observes, “The fan is consistently characterized (referencing the term’s origin) as a potential fanatic. This means that fandom is seen as excessive, bordering on deranged behavior” (as qtd in Urbanski 5). In a greater sense, though, the internet has made it possible for unique fandoms to emerge, as like-minded people from all over the world are able to find each other and form communities. From [podcast Facebook pages](https://www.facebook.com/groups/mbmbam/) to [Johnlock fan fiction communities](https://www.fanfiction.net/community/Best-of-JohnLock/100168/), these communities spring up and quickly create their own ways of communicating and interacting around a shared interest.

Students will write a RAB on a published portfolio of a community or a celebrity in order to identify different ways of integrating research as well as primary research methods. Then they will write their own profile of an online community or fandom, in which they will be encouraged to contact a member of the community for an interview. They will analyze the rhetoric, interaction, and compositions involved in the group, as well as identifying if they are an inside or outsider to the group and how that affects their profile. We will also talk about the ethical considerations when doing anthropological research on a group of which one is not part. Overall, students should learn how to do primary research, synthesize sources, and represent someone’s words and interests with respect and thoughtful ness.

*Unit V: Going Live*

Finally, in the last unit, students will remediate their profile of a fandom and create a visual representation of the fandom, which they will analyze rhetorically for their final RAB. They will then present their findings about their fandom, using their visual, to the rest of the class during the final time. This allows them to practice two others ways of communicating: visually and orally. While they will not have to do additional research, they will need to consider how best to use the research they have already completed to effectively address a face-to-face audience. This visual will be posted on their portfolio, though their presentation will be a large part of their grade for this unit. They will receive bonus points if they share their visual and/or their profile with the community about which they wrote. This move, while potentially frightening for a student, will prompt them to consider an audience who is deeply invested in the subject matter, an audience about which the student wrote. Ethics and accuracy becomes incredibly important.

Additionally in this unit, students will revise their “About Me” pages, clean up any website design, and write a final reflection to be turned in to me, not posted on their digital portfolio. On the final day of class, they will “turn in” their final portfolios that contain all of the work they have done this semester. After the portfolios are graded, students are free to do with their portfolio as they wish.

**Textbook**

For this class, I chose to assign *Twenty-One Genres and How to Write Them* by Brock Dethier as the textbook. Somewhat unconventional as a textbook, Dethier’s book is brief, more akin to a mass market paperback, but it focuses on genre and the moves made in those genres. While the genres span from literary analysis to wiki, Dethier covers many conventional genres alongside less commonly taught genres, such as e-mails. I think the language of genre “moves” is helpful, and students will need to make connections as they flip through the book, trying to find answers about the new online genres they will be composing within. Also, as the book does not cover research and citation in depth, I will be supplementing with sections from other textbooks to fill in the gaps.

I will also assign a number of online texts, some that involve theory about various digital issues and others that show the genre in action. This section of the reading list will constantly be in flux, because the internet is always in flux. I want to select readings that are responsive to the current climate. Additionally, students will identify their own texts for RABs, so instead of me finding a variety of examples to help students learn conventions of the form, they will be doing this work for each other.

**Assessment**

One of the challenges with any multimodal or digital work (or any composition work in general) is assessment. Troy Hicks writes about the challenge in his book *Assessing Students’ Digital Writing*. He quotes Stephen Tchudi as making a distinction between evaluation—which implies pre-determined criteria—and assessment,w hich focuses more on practical concerns, i.e. how well something *works.* Hicks also refers to the National Writing Project’s work on [multimodal writing assessment](http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae/07_nwp.html) that identifies five different domains that instructors should attend to in their assessment: (1) artifact, (2) context, (3) substance, (4) process management and technique, and (5) habits of mind. Ultimately, though, Hicks emphasizes that digital writing assignments must ask students to “move beyond something they could do without the affordances of digital tools” (127). Then, in assessment, “we must account for both process and product” (130). On this final point, Hicks makes the following passionate point: “students are writing for a global audience, and whether we support them in that process, making it transparent and engaging in our writing classrooms, is up to us. The world judges our students on their writing, and we must take the old adage of ‘teaching the process’ much more seriously” (123).

Assessment in this course will not be public, though the writing will be. The comments I made on students’ work will take into account both the public product and the private process. While drafts and process work may look differently in a digital context, I will emphasize the importance of reflection through authors’ notes as the way I can understand the student process. As they are working in new genres, I am particularly interested in how they approach these writing tasks and understand their role in public writing, and I will emphasize these narratives as being key to their assessment. I will also weigh the work they do online through commenting on each others’ blogs with the work they do in class. Both will contribute to our classroom culture, and both will impact the work our classroom does, collectively and individually.

**Conclusion**

The goals of this course fall in line with the overall goals for 10803: writing as inquiry. The shift, though, to analyze and create public digital texts will prompt students to engage in inquiry about their online participation, as they ask questions about both information and community found in online contexts. I believe working with online genres is a valuable endeavor as online rhetoric continues to divide and separate individuals from each other. My hope is that inviting students to examine why and how division and connection occur will encourage them to become better consumers and producers of online content.

**Additional Reading**

Dougherty, Jack and Tennyson O’Donnell, eds. *Web Writing: Why and How for Liberal Arts Teaching and Learning.* U of Michigan P, 2015.

Giltrow, Janet, and Dieter Stein. *Genres in the Internet.* Jon Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009.

Hicks, Troy. *Assessing Students’ Digital Writing: Protocols for Looking Closely.*

National Writing Project. *Because Digital Writing Matters.* Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Urbanski, Heather, ed. *Writing and the Digital Generation.* McFarland and Company, 2010.

Selber, Stuart. *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age.*