DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL WEB OR MULTIMEDIA ASSIGNMENT

Web and multimedia projects can be challenging for both instructors and students. Although we all probably watch and interact with these media regularly, we are often far less familiar with the technologies used to produce and distribute media objects of our own. Students and faculty who have never attempted a multimedia or web project, and may not understand the challenges and design opportunities associated with these different media. And even if you are familiar with both media, it isn’t always clear how norms of print scholarship and evaluation might apply in these settings.

In order to make the process less opaque, we’ve gathered some best practices from faculty and library staff who have designed or implemented multimedia and web projects in the past.

In a nutshell, they are:

- Define project goals and stick to them.
- Provide a clear assessment rubric.
- Teamwork is the norm for multimedia and web production.
- Keep the final product short.
- Help students with process and set milestones.
- Explain your expectations for using and attributing third-party content.
- Provide clear instructions for sharing/posting final project.

Details below.

Define Your Project Goals and Stick to Them

Clearly defining goals is crucial for a successful web or multimedia assignment. This recommendation functions on two levels. First, when you are designing an assignment, outlining your pedagogical goals and some general project goals will help you construct an assignment that is feasible and clearly relevant to your course. It will also help you communicate project parameters to students and answer subsequent questions about how their project ideas fit those parameters. Second, you will want each student team to define their goals for their particular project submission. These team-specific goals will serve as a touchstone when scripting and planning and for evaluating ideas and drafts. Often students get so caught up in the creative elements of scripting music or animating titles that the content or message of a project suffers, and setting clear goals (and milestones for checking the project is on track to meet those goals) will help them avoid this particular pitfall.

Multimedia and web project assignments support a range of course or degree-level learning goals, such as developing creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and “learning to learn” or researching skills needed to use a new technology. It is a good idea to share such goals with your students as it can give meaning to frustrations or requirements. Working through conflicts over who will do what might be a different experience, for example, if you know that “building collaboration skills” is an expected element of an assignment.
However, you will also need to define (or have students define) clear project goals, which are not the same as learning goals. Design professionals typically begin a multimedia project by articulating what their client wants or expects: their envisioned audience, the intended purpose or impact of the final product, and how the client defines success. The producer of a low-budget film, for example, would operate under different constraints and with different ends in mind, than one backed by a major studio to create a blockbuster family hit.

In some sense, you are the client for a project assignment, and your students will need to understand how you envision success in order to design a project that meets your expectations. Below are some questions that can help you articulate the goals for a particular project assignment. Depending on your pedagogical goals, you may want to articulate these goals yourself, you may want each project team to formulate their own goals, or a combination of both – for example, you might want to limit students to a narrative mode, but have them choose topics and define their audience.

- What topics or subjects should students focus on?
- Who is the envisioned target audience? (general public, children, scholars, peers?)
- What rhetorical approaches can (or should) students adopt? What is the purpose of the final web site, podcast, or film?

The table below lists common rhetorical approaches students are asked to adopt for multimedia and web projects. Note that certain terms (exposition, argumentation) are used differently in the world of film and literary scholarship. You and your students may have fixed and/or different ideas about what these terms mean based on previous experiences, so it is a good idea to define terms and discuss concrete examples with students to ensure everyone is on the same page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Approach</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Success Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Explain and analyze an idea, issue, or information. (Assumes author adopts objective, neutral POV.)</td>
<td>Reader informed or understands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentation or Persuasion</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Prove validity of an assertion; prompt reader to take some action. (author adopts explicit POV)</td>
<td>Reader is convinced or persuaded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Documentary film</td>
<td>Explain, prove assertion, or seek to persuade from authoritative point of view (Objective, neutral POV considered impossible)</td>
<td>Viewer informed, but also convinced and persuaded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation, description</td>
<td>Documentary film/writing</td>
<td>Document life with minimum intervention; little to no voice-overs, editing, etc.</td>
<td>Viewer/reader “sees” something from author’s/camera’s point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Documentary film</td>
<td>Filmmaker is part of production, her encounter with subjects is an explicit part of the work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Writing/film</td>
<td>Present events in a logical order, from introduction of a problem/ conflict to a climax, then resolution.</td>
<td>Viewer/reader experiences a story; story evokes intended emotion or reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia or digital</td>
<td>Web/multimedia design</td>
<td>In some uses, these phrases are synonymous with “narrative.” More judicious users restrict them to narratives using several media and a non-linear, interactive format.</td>
<td>Viewer experiences and helps construct story</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As your students begin to create their projects, they will want to refine their goals in order to reflect the particular direction their project takes. For example, if the goal of the assignment is producing a
web site that arguing for or against a particular proposition made in class, an individual team's project goal might be something like “convincing our classmates that proposition X is actually a bad idea.” See the handout on “Questions for Multimedia and Web Projects” for examples of questions that students can use to refine their project goals and think about structural and editorial implications of different rhetorical choices.

Provide a Clear Assessment Rubric

Your students may be unfamiliar with media and video production, and they will certainly be unfamiliar with how to apply the norms of scholarship that they have learned in a print context to these new media contexts. In the latter case, even expert faculty are still working out what good scholarship looks and sounds like in digital form, since digital scholarship is an emerging field. Given this uncertainty we highly recommend using a rubric of some kind to assess digital projects and to give students this rubric as a guideline when they start the assignment.

Constructing a rubric can be really helpful as an exercise if you are new to digital assignments. We’ve collected some rubrics on the Academic Technology help guide. You will want to edit and adapt these to fit your project goals and/or the goals that student teams have articulated. However, at the very least they can help you identify the kinds of elements one might assess: such as flow, image appropriateness, attribution, musical soundtrack, etc. Identifying which elements are important to you — and which elements are not — can help you develop your assignment. Sharing the rubric or at least what you’ve learned from developing it will in turn help your students know what elements of multimedia production are most important for your particular assignment.

Faculty who didn’t use a rubric the first time they assigned or assess a media project sometimes report being overwhelmed by the variety among the final submissions. It can be difficult to compare projects that employ different rhetorical strategies, for example, such as a website that presents a clear argument by comparing supporting evidence from both sides, and one that makes using a narrative told from a fictional victim’s point of view to convince an audience to take a particular side. If each group has specified their project goal in advance, however, you can assess each according to how effectively they met those goals. Another common assessment dilemma faculty report is difficulty comparing very polished, technically skilled work and with projects that are unpolished but may be more engaging or present a better argument. Weighing deficiencies against merits is much easier if you’ve worked out a rubric for which criteria you will assess and how much each is weighted in advance, and if you’ve shared it with students they are less likely to submit a final project that completely overlooks an essential component.

Teamwork is the Norm for Multimedia and Web Production

We’ve been talking about “student teams,” because, unlike writing, multimedia and web production typically involve teams of individuals who specialize in different production tasks. It is a good idea to replicate this model for your class projects by having students work in groups or at least pairs. Some instructors have had success with surveying students in advance to find out who has relevant technical skills or experience, and then organizing the groups so that each has at least one relatively technically skilled team member. Even if you don’t find enough expertise to go around or you don’t want to organize groups in this way, having a teammate or two with whom you can discuss ideas, share problems, and troubleshoot together can help minimize the burden on any single student. On a practical level, grouping students in teams can also help with resource availability if students need to use scanners, tripods, or other equipment that they are unlikely to personally own and which the college has available in more limited numbers. Similarly, if the assignment involves
interviewing someone or collecting data or footage in a particular location, having students work in teams can reduce the demand on that pool of potential subjects or location by a factor of two or three.

For a technically complex project, you might recommend team members consider specializing somewhat, so that one person becomes the primary videographer and learns to work the camera, while another watches a few tutorials to learn the video editing software basics, for example. In a film or web design program, mastering all related technical skills might be a crucial learning outcome. It is unlikely that this is the case for a multimedia or web project in an academic course, and specialization can increase the overall skill level of the team, while enabling everyone to focus on tasks the learning outcomes of this type of course, such as defining a good argument, presenting evidence visually, understanding how structural and design choices impact an argument.

Help Students with Process

Novices will have only the vaguest sense of how to get from a project idea to a website, podcast, or film, or how long the process might take. Successful assignments help students with plan projects realistically by describing typical project phases, providing resources to help with each phase, and building in milestone deadlines. Milestones not only help teams organize their work over time and avoid procrastination, but can be used as opportunities to get feedback at different stages.

For most projects, you will need three or four milestones:

**Project design abstract.** This is analogous to a topic statement for a writing assignment, where the team explains the goal of the project, the topic or subject they are focusing on, and their conditions for success. You might also ask them to briefly describe resources they plan to use, footage they plan to take, or sketch out some of the content they want to include. The goal of this milestone is to check that teams have come up with a concrete idea, that their ideas fit the scope of the assignment, and that they are reasonable given time constraints, their own skill level, and available resources.

**Script, storyboard, logic map, or page mock-ups.** This is analogous to an outline in for a writing assignment. One trap students fall into with multimedia projects is they jump right in and start producing content, without adequately planning what elements they need or how they will put them together. They may amass a lot of content, but they may fail to organize a coherent narrative or argument, or develop one only to discover that their content does not really match. This is essentially a planning exercise, with a goal of ensure students are thinking holistically and have some sense of how they will achieve their project goals. The format will vary depending on the type of project, and you can use this to give feedback or start a dialog aboard structure, presentation, and design choices.

**Script.** "Shooting scripts” are common planning documents in long-form narrative and documentary film and radio production. These scripts include verbatim scripts for dialog or voiceover narration, but also have descriptions of concurrent images and actions.

**Storyboard.** A storyboard is a more visually oriented script. Key scenes, camera shots, or video content are represented with still images, with accompanying narration or dialog written below each image. See our Academic Technology help guide for downloadable templates.
Logic map. For web pages and interactive multimedia content, students will need to visualize the links between elements as well as the text, image, audio, and video elements themselves. Concept or mind-mapping software is handy for this kind of outlining, and there are many free, online options students can use. Flowcharts are also an option, and MS Word and PowerPoint also have built-in flowcharting design elements that make this simpler (see Academic Technology help guide for details).

Page Mock-Ups. Web designers often do page mock-ups to plan and discuss the visual and navigational elements of site design. PowerPoint can be used for quick templating, as it allows you to easily move, group, and align text, image, and graphic elements.

Rough cut/Final cut. For a relatively simple project with minimal editing or design expectations, students might be able to go from the “outline” phase to a final product without too much difficulty. For more complex or higher-stakes projects, or in cases where design elements or emotional impact is key, you may want to build in a rough cut milestone, so students can get audience feedback (from you and their peers) first.

Be sure to leave students with enough time to complete the project, taking into consideration any constraints due to resources and other demands on their time. Three weeks is probably an absolute minimum. Add extra time if for students to do significant editing, adding soundtracks and titles, or pulling together a large number of images and links. Frontload the milestones so that the first two come in the first third of the time allotted and leave more time for production and editing.

Keep the Final Product Short/Small

Length and breadth exponentially increase the difficulty and amount of time involved in a multimedia project. For a video project, for example, a longer video not only requires more planning, shooting, and editing, but can drastically increase file size, which in turn increases the amount of time required to render (i.e., for the computer to process) editorial changes a student makes. For a web project, expansion creates difficulty in terms of managing links and organizational hierarchy. In both cases, expansion can also affect distribution – a longer video will take longer to upload and may exceed the Moodle file limits, for example, and external hosting sites like Omeka.net may have upper storage limits.

Although may not seem like much, 2-3 minutes is a good UPPER limit for a class audio or visual project. Depending on the project, for a web site, you may want to suggest parameters for the number of pages or menu items (i.e., a home page and four menu links to second-tier pages) or the minimum and maximum number of items, cases, images or objects discussed on the site.

Explain your Expectations for Using and Attributing Third-Party Contents

Copyright and attribution are very gray areas when it comes to digital production in a classroom context. On the one hand, copyright law is a notoriously grey area, with breaches of copyright and fair use essentially decided on a case-by-case basis. On the other hand, unlike in print scholarship where there are time-honored cultural norms for signaling when you are borrowing material and where it came from, such norms have yet to emerge within the newer field of digital scholarship. You will thus need to establish your own expectations with respect to these issues and communicate them to your students:

- Can students incorporate images, music, video clips, or text created by others in their web or multimedia project?
If yes, what about copyrighted material? Should they avoid it altogether or can they use it within guidelines that qualify as “fair use” in an educational context?

How do they indicate the sources of the material they borrow – should they have captions, use a credit screen, etc.?

If students can use third-party elements, they can use Flickr, YouTube, and other common media sharing sites or search engines to search for Creative Commons or GNU-licensed material that has been shared publicly under specific terms (generally for non-commercial use, with attributions.)

Copyright law also provides for a certain degree of “fair use” or royalty-free usage within an educational setting, although opinion is divided over how much. The TEACH Act of 2002 suggested the following guidelines for different types of works:

- **Music, video, animation:** 10% or 30 seconds, whichever is shorter.
- **Words:** 10% or up to 1000 words, whichever is shorter.
- **Illustrations, photos, graphics:** No more than 5 images from one artist, or 10% or 15 works from a collection, whichever is smaller.

However, these are simply guidelines. Type of usage is important – incorporating 10% of a song into video made for an assignment (considered a “mediated instructional activity”) is definitely fair use, but if the student subsequently posts the video to YouTube and accepts ad revenue for it, that subsequent use no longer qualifies, since a) the audience is no longer restricted to the class and b) the use could be interpreted as infringing on the author’s ability to earn income from usage. Conversely, many educators believe that use of longer segments than those described above can still be considered educational “fair use” within a class project, if the audience for the final project is restricted to the class, material is suitably attributed, and/or students are actively commenting or engaging with the material used (i.e., it isn’t simply a background image, but rather an integral part of the scholarly work). Some faculty require students to ask permission to use copyrighted material in their coursework and let the authors determine whether material is used or not. (Be sure to prepare students for the possibility that no one responds or that they cannot find the copyright holder.) Others recommend students stick to the limits above, and use non-copyrighted or homemade materials (easier than ever to find and create) for anything longer.

**Provide Clear Instructions for Sharing/Posting Final Products**

In both cases, students will need clear advice about how to turn in their multimedia or web projects. For web projects, this may be as simple as e-mailing you and/or the class the URL for the project site (and making sure you have permission to view it). If you’d like the sites posted in a central place, you can set up a Moodle forum and ask students to post the URLs there instead. (You can also add links to the different project sites to your course Moodle page or to a web/blog page if you’ve set one up. For audio or short video projects, you can set up a Podcast activity in Moodle, and students can post their videos there. Students can upload longer videos to YouTube and share links with you and the class.)