What is the New Rhetoric?
What is the New Rhetoric?

Edited by

Susan E. Thomas

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
For Eileen Meagher, who introduced me to Rhetoric
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11-1. A.W. Robertson and Grover A. Whalen with the Westinghouse Time Capsule of Cupaloy.

11-2 Aerial Photograph of Westinghouse Building

11-3 Diagram of Time Capsule Site
Any book that makes us think hard and critically about “truth,” “lying,” “communication,” “persuasion,” “education for social engagement,” “great creative writing” (versus “everyday scribbling”) — and much more — must surely be welcome today, when media and political “spin” saturate our environment. The word “rhetoric” challenges us today, not least because in many senses it meshes in so well with the popular notion of “discourse,” developed by Michel Foucault. As readers will doubtless be aware, Foucault’s notion of “discourse” (with a lot of help from Jacques Derrida’s critique of “phonologism” and other French critical theory) sublimely destroyed the “modernist” project that has governed cultural endeavour in the West since the Renaissance — and is still very much alive, so much so that one scholar has proposed that it will eventually revive and overwhelm its great rival, “postmodernism”!

“Rhetoric” is closely linked to “discourse” because both are relativist terms — every social unit or even individual has his / her / its “discourse” or “rhetoric” and no one “discourse” or “rhetoric” should be privileged over the other. All disciplines also have their “discourse,” whether it is a matter of medical discourse, legal discourse, the discourse of local government, or whatever. The notion of “discourse” is in this sense contrary to the idea of “absolute disciplinary truth,” which each discipline naturally encourages. In fact, in a rhetorical or “discourse-oriented” perspective, “truth” becomes what you can persuade another to believe — as in modern advertising. But “rhetoric” is a much older term than “discourse.” Originally it was a classical Greek word for “the art of public speaking,” and was “invented” to allow people to make courtroom appearances to claim land lost to their families during the heyday of “tyrants” in Sicily. It is the Latin-using intellectual culture that succeeded Greek culture and lasted from at least 100 B.C. to well after 1600 A.D., the term it came to be the accepted word for the storied persuasion skills of ancient Greece and Rome, as modified and extended by one thousand years of western cultural history. These storied persuasion skills were developed in a society more devoted to the teaching and practice of word play and effective verbal communication (oral and written) than any previous or even, perhaps, subsequent civilization. Why was this so? Because in the society of ancient “democratic” Athens (fifth and
fourth centuries B.C.) and the Roman Republic (which ended c. 31 B.C.), “success” was open to all (so long as you were not a slave, an ex-slave, a woman, a child or a ‘foreigner!’), though strongly hedged in by accepted notions of socially elite status and illustrious family lineage. Under the Roman Empire conformity and the linguistic skills necessary to enforce it were at a premium, so that a rhetorical education ranked even with a legal education as a sure-fire career-path for ambitious middle and upper class youths. Late in the Roman imperial period (which extended from c.31 B.C. to c. 475 A.D.) Christianity came to pose the ultimate challenge to rhetorical ideas and practices: the prolific writer and intellectual giant of his day, “Saint” Augustine (354-430 A.D.), a tried teacher of the “old rhetoric” of the Empire, decisively revolutionised rhetorical ideals and teaching by stressing behavioural admiration of great biblical heroes and deep study of the text of the Bible itself, counselling his students to “abandon” the old “preceptive” rhetoric of earlier times.

Despite Augustine, the so-called *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, or “Rhetoric written for [friend] Herennius” and called in later medieval and Renaissance times the “new” rhetoric, to distinguish it from the “old” rhetoric represented by Cicero’s earliest work, the *De inventione* (“On invention”—the first part of the rhetorical curriculum), became an all-time record hit textbook for the Greek and Roman art of persuasion in the period c.400 – 1600 A.D. Written at around the same time as Cicero’s *De inventione*, that is, in the first two decades of the last century B.C., the “Rhetoric written for [friend] Herennius” was soon lost and then rediscovered around 400 A.D. It achieved its premier status because it dealt with the whole rhetorical curriculum (the finding of the most appropriate arguments, the arrangement of them, the memorization of them, the delivery of them and the ornamentation of them with graceful figures of speech and thought), and it was written in simple, didactic Latin—the universal learned language of the time. It was also illustrated with easy and relevant examples, many of them composed by the writer himself, who believed that you should illustrate your rhetorical precepts with your own compositions rather than purple passages taken from prior writings.

The “Rhetoric written for [friend] Herennius,” together with certain advanced Greek and Roman textbooks, gathered momentum over the thousand and more years following the Herennius text’s “rediscovery” and even the highly opinionated view of certain late-fifteenth-century rhetorical teachers that it was not by Cicero, did not dent its popularity. By the time the long road from Aristotle’s textbook on rhetoric and its near-contemporary, anonymous, “Rhetoric for Alexander” (fourth century B.C.10) had been traversed, the “old” and the “new” rhetoric amounted to a pretty formidable arsenal of techniques and practices for constructing “truth” and persuading others of it.
But what are we today to make of this huge and effective corpus and in what senses can there be today a further “new rhetoric”? As George Pullman says below, “The old rhetoric, it seems, is something difficult to outrun.” In this Pullman echoes the statement of Edward P.J. Corbett, who, in his Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, wrote:

The author believes that the elaborate system of the ancients, which taught the student how to find something to say, how to select and organize his material, and how to phrase it in the best possible way, is still useful and effective—perhaps more useful and effective than the various courses of study that replaced it.

We may well argue that today all the ancient techniques of persuasion are utilized—knowingly or unknowingly—in our modern systems of marketing and advertising—though we do not build into these systems the ethical and moral imperatives that great rhetorical writers of the past, such as Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, did. Nor do we make sure that our young are fully familiar with all the techniques of oral and written persuasion that may be available to them, as was common in former times. Here the warning of Pratkanis and Aronson is very pertinent:

We believe that, in an age of propaganda, the most important thing for the survival of democracy is the existence of communicators who know how to present their message clearly and fairly, coupled with an informed electorate that knows the difference between a fair presentation and a con job. It is toward achieving these ends that we wrote this book.

Rhetoric, indeed, is too important to be left to today’s marketing experts. Use of the term has expanded enormously in recent times, to include all cultures, genders, classes and even animals. We must ourselves nowadays understand the history and meaning of the word and how it might empower us today to meet and deal effectively with the explosion of new technologies of persuasion and communication, particularly in regard to the new electronic age and the infinite changes and possibilities associated with it. The authors of the present volume are fully aware of the inherited rhetorical tradition and of the “changes” that must be incorporated into the “new” rhetoric for our own times. Indeed, anyone nowadays interested in “writing”; “text / hypertext”; “printed / oral / electronic”; the “open” nature of the medieval manuscript or the electronic text, versus the “fixity” or “closed” nature of the “printed” text; “signification / representation / mechanisation / socialisation”; literacy / orality; literacy / literature; “dialogic”; “performance”; biology / cognitive psychology / psychoneurology / psycholinguistics; “letterracy / prosodacy / spriting /
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I recommend this book warmly to every reader interested in the world of discourse of the twenty-first century, and I congratulate its editor and its authors for their prophetic, widely visionary and multi-competent presentations, which will take the reader firmly into a future thoroughly based upon the experience of the past.

Notes

2. According to Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, in *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: Freeman, 1992), 4, ‘Each year … the typical American [read ‘Australian’] … will view roughly 38,000 commercials…’
4. For the impact of this idea on aboriginal history, see the introduction to Jan Kociumbas, ed., *Maps, Dreams, History: Race and Representation in Australia*, (Sydney Studies in History 8, History Department, University of Sydney, 1998).
9. See George Pullman’s essay below.
12. Edward P.J Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), vii. The present writer had occasion once to deliver a lecture on the use of classical rhetorical theory in modern advertising (and modern advertising has produced a vast scholastic and didactic literature than dwarfs the ancient rhetorical curriculum!). He chose for his example the front page of a current issue of the Virgin Blue in-flight magazine *Voyeur* and showed how almost every technique advised in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* was to be found exploited in this one front page!
15. See Lunsford’s re-definition of this term in her paper below.
16. See Gardiner’s paper below.
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And finally, the all-star lineup of contributors, with whom I have been privileged to work and from whom I have learned much.
INTRODUCTION

SUSAN THOMAS

This collection of essays, resulting from the international conference of the same name, explores how rhetoric is informing and influencing research and teaching practices in higher education. It offers a broad interdisciplinary scope and focuses on issues pertinent to the academy, including the relationship between rhetoric and technology, teaching methodologies, research methodologies, broader issues of educational practice, professional communication, and ethics.

Though sometimes considered worlds apart in theory and practice, the arts and sciences are united by their reliance on rhetoric—the theoretical bridge between classical and contemporary communication practices and between the academy and the professions. Since the 1960s, the definitions of “new rhetoric” have expanded to encompass a variety of theories and movements, raising the question of how rhetoric is understood and employed in the twenty-first century. When scholars and business leaders gathered at the University of Sydney on 3 September 2005 to discuss “What is the New Rhetoric?,” three major themes emerged:

1. How the classical art of rhetoric is still relevant today;
2. How it is directly related to modern technologies and the new modes of communication they have spawned;
3. How rhetorical practice is informing research methodologies and teaching and learning practices in the contemporary academy.

The essays collected here represent variations on these themes, with each attempting to answer the title’s deliberately provocative question.

The five canons of classical rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery) are present in everyday communication, written as well as oral, especially in technological environments. In “Rhetorically Speaking, What’s New?,” George Pullman argues that “the traditional art of memory as it comes to us via Cicero and Quintilian, is a mnemotechnique that might be called associative visualization—associating topics upon which we need to speak with
an object we can readily imagine. The icons on the computer desktop, for example, are memory aids in the sense that they enable us to activate programs the actual location of which we probably don’t even know.”

In “Key Questions for a New Rhetoric,” Andrea Lunsford points out that contemporary pedagogies are “deeply technologised, with orality, performance and delivery returning to the classroom.” She indicates that with the fifth canon of rhetoric [delivery] returning to prominence via new technologies, “students must now assess how they deliver the knowledge they produce—which evokes a new rhetoric as epistemic . . . and multimodal.”

Particularly in this age of information, critical applications of rhetoric are vital for managing, interpreting and processing data, but in the euphoria of technological advancement, have we been too quick to ascribe to the electronic word virtues long inherent in traditional print text? In “What’s New and How New Is It,” Bruce Gardiner argues that print text has always possessed the capacity for multi-dimensionality and that hypertext offers merely another mode of textual production rather than a revolution in authorship or readership.

With terms such as “rhetoric of the media,” “empty rhetoric,” and “political rhetoric” in common parlance, it’s no surprise that “rhetoric” is often a slippery term, associated with trickery, deception or simply the antithesis of reality. In the academy, the word “rhetoric” is too often perceived as synonymous with remedial, with “fixing up” bad writing, with teaching grammar and with decorating prose. But in the contemporary university, rhetoric has a much deeper role that far surpasses these narrow definitions. In “Perspectives in an Undergraduate Education: Rhetoric, Ethnography and Textual Culture,” Claire Woods argues that rhetoric is central to a critical understanding of textual culture, to developing “an understanding of the theoretical and applied work involved in the tekne of text production as readers, writers, makers and receivers of multi-genre textual forms.” She suggests that a dynamic coalescence of theoretical perspectives applied to the study of texts and to writing pedagogy might allow for the emergence of a new version of rhetoric: the rhetoric of textual culture. In “Rhetorics of the Sciences: Mediation and New Rhetorical Theory,” Joan Leach identifies the classical rhetorical terminology of figuration as “a fine location for considering ‘new rhetorics,'” claiming that “it is rhetorical critics and theorists’ stance on the antique, more specifically—on figuration—that frequently divides them.” She asks, “how can the discourses of a field of inquiry alive only since the 17th century usefully be analysed with terms from the 5th century BCE?” and reviews key arguments about the “continued relevance of figuration for generating theories of meaning in and about scientific texts.” In “Voice Embodied: Rhetoric at the Intersection of Writing and Performance,” D. Ohlandt argues that the disciplines of theatre studies and writing studies are more closely linked
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than one might realize. She uses practical examples from the writing classroom and the acting workshop to demonstrate how putting performance studies back into Rhetoric (or the other way around) can be mutually beneficial for two seemingly unlike disciplines. In “The New Assessment and the New Rhetoric,” Beth Kalikoff describes how responding to our students’ work is a rhetorical act all its own and why it is necessary to assess our own assessment methods in light of rhetorical best practice.

In “Arts of Modesty in Early Modern Women’s Poetry” and “Rhetorical Sex,” Patricia Pender and Kate Lilley demonstrate how a better understanding of women’s rhetoric as represented in early modern literature is enhanced by the application of contemporary rhetorical theory. In “The Physical and Rhetorical Placement of the Westinghouse Time Capsule of Cupaloy,” Fergus Armstrong discusses the Westinghouse Corporation’s rhetorical strategy in marketing the time capsule (and thereby the corporation itself) as the promotional drawcard for the Westinghouse Company Building at the 1939/1940 New York World’s Fair. In “Late Modern Blog,” Melissa Hardie compares the postcarding craze of the 1940s to the contemporary blogging phenomenon. And in “New Voices of New Rhetoric,” Sacha Janzcuk, Joel Meares and Alys Moody discuss Walter Ong’s concept of open and closed textual systems, reality television, and fanfiction.

As Edward P.J. Corbett, widely regarded as a giant of 20th-century rhetoric, described it, and as these essays prove, rhetoric is the “enabling discipline,” which blurs cultural and disciplinary boundaries in order to enable better communication—in the classroom, in the boardroom, and even in the chatroom. Although the laptop has replaced the scroll, the classical art of rhetoric remains a pillar of ethical and meaningful human communication.

I am particularly pleased that this collection offers a diversity of viewpoints, from well-known, seasoned experts in the fields of Rhetoric and Composition, Communication Studies, English Studies, Performance Studies, and Science, as well as new voices of emerging scholars. It is my hope that this book will be a valuable research and teaching resource in the humanities and sciences alike, in both tertiary and secondary educational circles and wherever rhetorical inquiry is taking shape.
Most U.S. scholars of rhetoric and writing studies who are around my age have a story to tell about how and when they discovered rhetoric, and I am certainly no exception to that rule. I started teaching at a two-year college in Florida in 1968, after completing my MA in English and teaching in high school for a couple of years. A year later or two, the dean of the college asked me to write some guides for students to use in writing papers for the required composition courses. I spent the entire summer working on this project and ended up with little booklets on Writing an Expository Essay, Writing a Descriptive Essay, Writing a Narrative Essay, Writing a Persuasive Essay, and—what I was especially proud of—Writing a Combination Essay. I had figured out how to write these booklets by finding essays in these modes and analyzing them, breaking them down into steps, and then trying to guide students through that process. I did this completely by instinct: I was utterly without training in the teaching of writing, having exempted the required courses at my university, having gone through a one-half-day training session before I became a Teaching Assistant during my MA program, and having taught only literature in high school. So I was fairly proud of coming up with something to say about how to write various kinds of college papers.

Pride, as they say, goeth before a fall. And one day that fall, after the school year started and I had presented the little booklets to my dean, I was sitting in my little cubicle office when I received a complimentary book from Oxford University Press. It was titled Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, by Edward P. J. Corbett. I knew absolutely nothing about rhetoric, classical or otherwise, so I took the book home with me and started to read—and to discover rhetoric. What I found, of course, was that I had no need to invent everything in those little booklets from scratch: here before me was a systematic account of the arts of communication, one that had been around for over two thousand years. I tell this story to remind myself, and others, that the “old” rhetoric was
entirely new to me and, indeed, the “old” or traditional rhetoric has a way of becoming new to successive generations of students and scholars. The next year I got up my courage to apply to Ph.D. programs, and on the top of my list was Ohio State University, where Professor Corbett taught. I studied there for five years and became the first person at that university to take a specialty in rhetoric and writing studies, though I pretty much had to do this all in directed reading sessions with Professor Corbett, who was not teaching graduate courses on rhetoric when I got there. The tradition I studied with Ed Corbett was decidedly “old”: I worked my way chronologically from Plato and Aristotle up to Chaim Perelman and Kenneth Burke, and by the time I left Ohio State for the University of British Columbia in 1977, a number of graduate students were choosing to pursue specialties in rhetoric and writing. In 1987 I returned to Ohio State to help build the undergraduate and graduate program in rhetoric and writing within the Department of English. Today that university has 14 scholars professing rhetoric and writing, a writing minor at the undergraduate level, a full graduate program, a Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing—all in addition to the required first-year writing program. Ohio State’s program is typical of a number of large state universities in the United States, where the revival of rhetoric in the 1960s (this was the “new” rhetoric of the time) took hold most strongly. What characterized those early programs was a deep commitment to undergraduate education and to access to that education for all students; a recognition that the ancient art of rhetoric (which Aristotle defined both as “the art of discovering in any case all the available means of persuasion” and as “the art and practice of coming to sound judgment”) provided a robust theoretical and historical foundation for the teaching of writing, and a determination to achieve disciplinary status for the field of rhetoric and writing studies, then widely referred to as “composition and rhetoric.” What is new in this rendition of the rhetorical tradition, then, is the very self-conscious linking of rhetoric with writing or composition. In retrospect, it’s clear that as the cultural capital of writing grew (beginning in the age of the printing press and reaching a crescendo in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the fortunes of rhetoric declined. What counted was not the eloquence of old but what could be put in writing. As a result, colleges turned away from the “old” rhetorical tradition, which had focused on students composing and performing their own discourses and increasingly to controlled instruction in correct writing and, primarily, to reading, to hermeneutics, and to the consumption rather than the production of discourse. So what was “new” in the 60s and 70s revival of rhetoric was, at least in part, an attempt to return to the old tradition and to concentrate on the actual discursive practices and products of student writers. Not coincidentally, this “new” rhetoric with its
commitment to student writing was to form the basis for a new discipline, which Robert Connors calls Composition-Rhetoric.

In some ways, these goals have been met in the U.S., sometimes even spectacularly so. Today, several book series (such as those at the University of Pittsburgh Press and Southern Illinois University Press) and dozens of journals are devoted to rhetoric and writing, and at least one of them—College Composition and Communication—is harder to publish in than the PMLA. Scores of intensive Ph.D. programs in rhetoric and writing criss-cross the country, and an ever-growing number of conferences—from the Rhetoric Society of America, to Feminisms and Rhetorics—now make it impossible for any scholar to attend them all. And even the so-called Ivy League Schools like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale have begun writing programs for undergraduates. At Stanford, the Program in Writing and Rhetoric teaches two required courses for all students, offers several undergraduate elective courses in writing and rhetoric as well as at least two graduate courses every year (I am currently teaching a graduate seminar on rhetoric’s fourth canon, Memoria).

Such successes are at best only partial, however: writing and rhetoric is still a marginalized field faced with a series of daunting challenges, and many U.S. scholars would agree, I think, that the future of the discipline depends on responding to these challenges in ways that will help to create and maintain yet another “new” rhetoric.

First among these challenges is location: Where within the university should a “new” rhetoric be housed and what should be its institutional affiliations and responsibilities? In the U.S., these questions are very much up for grabs. Most programs in rhetoric and writing remain within Departments of English (or occasionally Departments of Communications), but the last decade has seen a growing trend for rhetoric and writing to separate and form departments of their own that offer both undergraduate and graduate courses. These new departments do not yet have a firm core: some focus on professional discourse, some on literacy and language, some on media, some on history, some on technology, and writing, and some try for an omnibus approach that would bring all these strands together. What is lost in such a move to new departments, of course, is the connection to reading and literature, which remain in Departments of English. What is gained, however, is a chance to establish disciplinary power within university structures and to create programs and courses responsive to student needs in the 21st century. My own sense is that such new departments will continue to proliferate and that in doing so the outlines of an undergraduate major in rhetoric and writing will grow ever more clear. But I have some doubts, not about departments of rhetoric and writing per se, but about departments in general: it seems clear that disciplinary boundaries are crumbling, that the old framework of departments, based on the 19th century
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German system, is no longer adequate for the work scholars need to do, and that some other structure needs to arise (a sign of this is the exponential growth of interdisciplinary centers and institutes). So a “new” department of rhetoric and writing may find itself “old” fairly shortly.

No matter where rhetoric and writing is located, the field faces other serious challenges and opportunities, chief among them the relationship to new technologies. When I think of the changes I have seen in my lifetime, my head fairly swims. When I won the ninth grade typing medal in my junior high school, I did it on a manual typewriter, the kind you had to literally pound. As an undergraduate, I had the luxury of a little portable manual typewriter: not until graduate school did I sink into the pleasures of the IBM selectric. At the age of 63, then, I am old enough to take a long view of the history of writing and rhetoric’s connection to technology, one that did little to prepare me for the learning curve I faced when I got my first computer in 1985.

Since then I have become more proficient—and I am still a rocket-fast keyboarder thanks to that ninth-grade drilling. But I am still very much a learner of the new media, one who is almost daily surprised by how writing and the teaching of writing have changed in the thirty years of my career. Every few years, a new body of literature needs to be learned, a new set of practices and a new kind of teaching mastered. I realize as I look back over my career that I and other teachers of writing and rhetoric have had to reinvent ourselves and our discipline several times, and that more change is definitely in sight. Thus the newest “new” rhetoric is one that is deeply mediated, deeply technologized. In fact, writing is one of the western world’s oldest technologies and rhetoric, plastic art that it is, has consistently transformed itself in relation to new and emerging technologies. Today, this ability to mold itself to new realities is key to the new rhetoric, presenting special challenges, and special opportunities for those who profess rhetoric and writing.

No change has been more significant than the return of orality, performance, and delivery to the field of rhetoric and writing and to the classroom. As noted above, in the U.S., the increasing hegemony of writing throughout the nineteenth century had hidden the body and performance from critical view and shifted attention away from oral and embodied delivery to textual production of the printed page. Beginning in the mid twentieth century, however, and growing exponentially in the last two decades, the arts and crafts associated with delivery, the fifth canon of rhetoric, have moved to the center of our discipline. To view writing as an active performance, that is as an act always involving the body and performance—enriches I. A. Richards’s notion of the interanimation of words: it is not only that individual words shift meaning given their context within a sentence, but also that words shift meaning given their embodied context and their physical location in the world. Calling attention to this
phenomenon raises our awareness of the power language gains through physical interaction and exchange, and it transforms our understanding of Kenneth Burke's definition of humans as "symbol-using, symbol-misusing animals." To be human is to speak and write and perform through multiple systems of signification and to inhabit not only what Walter Ong calls “secondary orality,” a term associated with the electric technologies that make possible the phenomenon of 24/7 surround-sound split-screen cable-TV culture but also "secondary literacy," a term I use to name a literacy that is both highly inflected by oral forms, structures, and rhythms and highly aware of itself as writing, understood as variously organized and mediated systems of signification.

In this scene of secondary orality and secondary literacy, student writers must be able to think critically and carefully about how to deliver the knowledge they produce. Yet in the U.S., we are still only marginally prepared to help them do so. It is as though our old reliable rhetorical triangle of writer, reader, and message is transforming itself before our eyes, moving from three discrete angles to a shimmering, humming, dynamic set of performative relationships. And in this scene, writing favors immediacy, quickness, associative leaps, and a fluid and flexible sense of correctness—akin to what Winston Weathers long ago described as Grammar B. As I’m using it, then, secondary literacy advances a looser prose style, infiltrated by visual and aural components to mirror the agility and shiftiness of language filtered through and transformed by digital technologies and to allow for, indeed demand, performance. To describe such literacies, we need more expansive definitions of writing along with a flexible critical vocabulary and a catalogue of the writing and rhetorical situations that call for amplified, performative, and embodied discourse of many different kinds.

The Read/Write Weblog notes, in late April, 2005, that “neither ‘read’ nor ‘write’ really means what it used to when we talk about literacy or being literate.” My colleague Marvin Diogenes and I have talked endlessly about what I’m calling our “vocabulary problem,” and eventually we tried our hand at defining writing in a way that does not mirror the reductiveness of current dictionary definitions:

**Writing**: A technology for creating conceptual frameworks and creating, sustaining, and performing lines of thought within those frameworks, drawing from and expanding on existing conventions and genres, utilizing signs and symbols, incorporating materials drawn from multiple sources, and taking advantage of the resources of a full range of media.

For all its clumsiness, this definition aims to capture the sense of writing I am trying to evoke—of a new rhetoric and writing as epistemic, performative, multivocal, multimodal, and multi-mediated.
One scholar who has been hard at work trying to create a more flexible critical vocabulary for writing and rhetoric is Tara Shankar, who recently completed her Ph.D. in Media Arts and Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In her dissertation, “Speaking on the Record,” Shankar traces the increasing power of writing, which she terms graphocentrism, noting that writing eventually became “the primary outlet for the most elitist uses of languages in many cultures.” She argues that the domination of print-based writing is now at an end and introduces a set of terms aimed at clarifying communicative relationships. To begin, she defines literacy as “the knowledge of language, domains of experience, and structure of discourse that permit one to use language as an object for learning reflection and analysis” and distinguishes this from Seymour Papert’s term letteracy, the “mechanical and presentational skills specific to writing.” This she contrasts with prosodacy, oral decoding and encoding abilities that indicate awareness of ways in which situated intentions, emotion, identity, and expression can be realized in and through the repleteness of spoken language.” Into this mix she adds the key term spriting. By “sprite,” a portmanteau combining speaking and writing, Shankar means speaking that “yields two technologically supported representations: the speech in audible form, and the speech in visual form. Spriting, therefore, equally encompasses digital speech recorders, speech editing tools, and any speech dictation recognition tools that would use speech in addition to text as an output mode.” The product of spriting she identifies as a spoken document, or talkument. As one reads a written text, she says, so oneaudes a talkument.

Much later in this fascinating dissertation, Shankar introduces spriting to two elementary schools and studies the collaborative “talkuments” the children produce using “SpriterWriter,” a system for composing and editing talkuments. Finding that students produce talkuments collaboratively with the greatest of ease, Shankar concludes that “Spriting seems to admit even closer, more integral collaborations than does writing, perhaps because spriting can more easily incorporate conversation as both planning and composition material.” Even more provocative to me, Shankar finds that “when children are released from the representational strictures of paper and pencil to compose language, they do not just talk their words, they sing their words. . . . . They sing pure sound and rhythm, words, advertisements, school songs, popular songs and television theme songs with equal abandon.” That is to say, they perform.

Shankar is not alone in her attention to performance. Recently, in fact, Jon Udell has called for performative literacies to become the basis for writing programs in the United States. In a discussion of the power of screencasting, Udell says “Writing and editing will remain the foundation skills they always were (and Shankar would agree), but we’ll increasingly combine them with
speech and video.” Teachers, however, can scarcely wait, however, for our own community, much less our society, to refine and accept such new terminologies or to perfect the tools and techniques necessary to them.

While this work goes on, whatever we call what our students are doing is racing ahead of our ability to describe it. So what’s a poor writing program to do? In the face of the enormous changes to literacies, Stanford’s Program in Writing and Rhetoric has been challenged to add a second required course to the Stanford curriculum. This new course, which we implemented fully during this last school year, has a complex mandate. In it, students are to build on the rhetorical analysis, research, and argument abilities that they practiced in their first writing course (and delivered primarily in traditional print forms) by continuing to carry out substantive research and develop compelling argumentative positions. But the course shifts focus from invention, arrangement, and style to rhetoric’s fifth canon, delivery.

Last September, the entire PWR faculty met for a week to work on this new PWR 2 course, and we ended the week exhilarated and enthusiastic about our goals:

- To build on the analytic and research-based argument strategies developed in PWR 1 through more intensive work with oral, visual, and multimedia rhetoric;
- To identify, evaluate, and synthesize materials across a range of media and to explore how to present these materials effectively in support of the students’ own arguments;
- To analyze the rhetoric of oral, visual, and multimedia documents with attention to how purpose, audience, and context help shape decisions about format, structure, and persuasive appeals;
- To learn to design appropriate and effective oral and multimedia texts;
- To conduct research appropriate to the specific documents being created;
- To reflect systematically on oral, visual, and multimedia rhetoric and writing.

We decided to pursue these goals through an assignment sequence that would be standard across our many different themed sections. We’d begin with an assignment we called “texts in translation,” one that asked students to take a fairly brief text and translate it from one form of delivery to another, to analyze the rhetorical strategies operative in the two versions, and then present their findings to the class. This assignment would, we hoped, set the stage for a multimedia research-based argument, one that would include substantive writing, research, collaboration, and delivery of the argument in one or more
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media. This assignment would take up most of five to six weeks of the course and might include various steps such as a proposal, documentation of research, several drafts, and the final live delivery of the project. The final major project would ask students to create a reflective essay that essentially analyzed their work in the course, noting how various media shaped their writing, how their rhetorical choices were affected by various media, how they used a new medium effectively in the presentation of research. This final meta-analysis would often lead to the third major class presentation.

As an aside, let me say that, early on, we faced the challenge of how to allow our students to “draft” their presentations in the same way they draft print essays. To address this issue, we developed a core of undergraduate tutors, one or two of whom are attached to each section. The tutors, who take a special training course, observe and respond extensively to the students’ practice presentations and help with taping the presentations for further discussion and analysis.

Now had we not been in such a state of euphoria, we would have noticed that this set of goals and assignments is, at the very least, daunting. And certainly our experience in trying to carry out one of our own assignments during a one-week institute held in September 2004 should have alerted us to the difficulty of what we were planning to do. We plunged into teaching PWR 2 with abandon, however: in retrospect it’s easy to see that we were to some extent dazzled by the possibilities presented to us, especially in the tech classrooms our Academic Technology Specialist specially designed for the PWR 2 classes. We and our students can do it all, we thought.

And indeed, we managed to do a lot. Teachers and students alike plunged into multimedia writing, producing films and videos, extensive audio essays (which are currently aired every week on Stanford’s campus radio station), and web texts of all kinds. But our students helped to rein us in. In their evaluations and in the extensive focus group discussions we held with students following their experience in PWR 2, they told us in no uncertain terms that while they loved the opportunity to explore new media in writing and to push their writing in new directions, they weren’t sure their writing was actually improving. (In other words, they knew they were learning something, but many of them wouldn’t call it writing.) So caught up were they in the fine points of Audacity, a software program for editing audio essays, or the pleasures of iMovies or the production of a Zine that the actual writing (or at least what students understood as writing) in these endeavors seemed to suffer. Moreover, they noted with irritation that the class workload differed dramatically across sections and, especially, that some classes provided for very thorough instruction in presentation and for lots of “drafts” of oral/multimedia presentations, while others did not. In short, they echoed our own concerns. Mid-year reflection told
us we did not have this course really “down” yet, so we went back to the drawing board. In particular, our Curriculum Committee worked to address three major concerns:

- How to balance academic with practical, real-world writing assignments;
- How to balance critique and analysis of multimedia rhetoric (skills most of us generally felt confident teaching) with practice in developing multimedia texts (here we felt less confident);
- How to balance technical training (ranging from PowerPoint to video production) with instruction in writing, rhetoric, and presentation.

We heard early on from upper administrators about their “horrible suspicion” that we might “just be teaching PowerPoint” on the one hand, and from our Undergraduate Advisory Board about their near-violent disagreements over what constituted an effective PowerPoint presentation, much less on how to teach one. So we’ve been particularly interested to compare reactions to this newly required second course to what we hear about PWR 1, the more “traditional” first-year course. While some students complain that our focus on research-based argument is too limiting, and that they want a chance to write more creatively or expressively, we don’t hear complaints about how we define research-based argument in the context of a research university. It’s in the context of PWR 2 that everyone—and no one—is an expert, and we feel as though we are hearing from every one of these folks.

With these points in mind, a group of us began to reconsider our course goals, to try to focus more on the role of writing and presentation in the course. We realized, for example, that just as we did not expect students in PWR 1 to conduct research at the level of graduate students, so we should not expect students in PWR 2 to create full-length films, videos, hypertexts, or other digital work at the level of students with specialized training in those areas. (Indeed, we were reminded politely, Stanford’s new major in Film and Media Studies would be grappling with that advanced task.) Instead, we posited that PWR 2 should orient students to media production as a means of persuasion in the way that PWR 1 does this task for research at the university level. What we had to remind ourselves (over and over again) was that the core values of PWR 2 entail rhetoric, research, argument, and presentation rather than advanced training in media production. The result of this rethinking and refocusing was fairly dramatic: almost to a person, we felt that our PWR 2 courses in the spring were far more coherent and rigorous than the ones we had taught in the winter because they placed the delivery of a research-based argument at the center of
the curriculum. And while we do not yet have student evaluations for these classes, we are hopeful that students will have noted the differences as well.

When we began our work on PWR 2, we thought that redefining writing (as highly mediated) and developing a new vocabulary for communicative literacies would yield to careful observation: just look around, we thought, and take note of what writing looks like today and how it functions—then new definitions and terms will be apparent enough. Our current version of the latest “new” rhetoric would be born. How naïve could we be! Redefining terms or creating a “new rhetoric and writing” is one thing: realizing and fully implementing any such redefinitions is quite another. Indeed, we have learned that teaching writing based on a substantive redefinition of writing affects every single aspect of our work: our theories of writing and rhetoric, our curriculum, our classroom configurations, our staffing, training, evaluation principles and procedures, our relationships with other programs (and with upper administration), and our methods and materials. We know, for instance, that traditional and familiar theories of writing have not focused on the material conditions of production or accounted for the inclusion of aural and visual elements (what we have nicknamed the “three v’s”: vocal, visual, verbal) at every stage of the writing process, much less on effective ways to perform the knowledge produced during those stages. And while the field of rhetoric and writing has led the way in how best to assess traditional forms of academic writing, we are now engaged in the complex work of assessing forms of digital, multimedia, and performed writing. We have even had to re-think our methods, from how we use collaboration in the classroom to how we teach research, to how we respond to students and their writing (or sprinting).

We of course are not the only ones struggling with this set of complex issues. In a blog entry on “screencasting as the new FYC,” C. G. Brooke takes up Jon Udell’s question: “Would I really suggest that techies will become fluid storytellers not only in the medium of the written essay, but also in the medium of the narrated screencast?” and then turns that quotation around to say “Would I really suggest that first-year composition take up the challenge of meeting those techies halfway, as well as the challenge of questioning our assumptions about the scope of writing?” to which he answers “Hell yes.” This is the challenge my colleague Eric Miraglia raised for us this year: how to fulfill our Faculty Senate’s mandate to “teach effective writing and speaking” while allowing students an opportunity for “authoring in the most compelling discursive modalities of their generation.”

There is no doubt in my mind that these “compelling discursive modalities”—webtexts, films, radio essays, multimedia presentations—are here to stay and that they, in fact, constitute the heart of what students of a new rhetoric need to learn and practice. But moving in this direction will not be easy.
First, we need to remember the power of the old rhetoric, and indeed to understand that the new modalities our students are practicing are in some ways echoes of the scene of writing and speaking in 5th century BCE Greece, when the oral performance of discourse took precedence. But we also need to remember the power and history of print textuality: the era of the book may be closing, but the power of print remains. The challenge for those professing writing and rhetoric today lies in facing such tensions and finding ways to honor while attempting to move beyond them. Doing so seems to me much more important than deciding on whether writing and rhetoric should be housed in a new and separate department or even arguing over whether there is or is not a “new” rhetoric. Perhaps the wisest course of action is to recognize that where there is language there will always be rhetoric, and that rhetoric will inevitably renew itself with each succeeding generation.

Notes

1. In making this claim about the linking of rhetoric to composition as a feature of a “new” rhetoric, I could go on to trace the focus on student writing (the process movement in composition and rhetoric) to a growing realization of how vastly writers differ (the late social constructionist and post process movements) and inevitably to the importance of difference of all kinds to writing and the teaching of writing. That trajectory leads to another radical revisioning of rhetoric—as potentially inclusive and non-hierarchical, for example) and has been the subject of a number of efforts by feminist and postcolonial scholars.

Works Cited