

Five Digital Composition Assignments

1. Slidecast

definition: a slidecast combines slides (e.g. Powerpoint) and an audio track into a single presentation where the slides are timed to the audio. While the audio can include music, in our case we are thinking about a recorded oral presentation.

Production

There two ways of producing slidecasts. Using Powerpoint and a microphone, one can create a movie file, which could be uploaded to a CMS (e.g. Blackboard or CompClass). Or one can use the more “traditional” approach where one uploads slides and audio separately and then syncs them together on an online space (e.g. slideshare.net). The end result looks the same and for our purposes would be the same. In more general terms the latter approach is more flexible in allowing the user to share the slides with others.

Production challenges: minimal

Slidecasts are produced with commonly available tools. Slide presentation software (e.g. Powerpoint), a web browser, and a microphone are all you will need. If you use the more traditional approach you will also need some audio recording software (e.g. Audacity or Garage Band (Apple)). Audacity is a free download. Powerpoint is free to our students through UBMicro if they don't already have it. These applications are also in our lab.

The only obstacle is the availability of microphones. Laptops have built-in microphones. Students with desktop computers are also likely to have microphones for gaming, Skype, etc. So it is likely that students will either have a microphone or be able to borrow one. We are purchasing some microphones which will make it possible to record audio in 128. However recording audio in a classroom environment is not optimal. Optionally students could hand in written transcripts, instead of recorded audio, or give presentations in class (assuming you had time). You might put students in groups and make sure there's a microphone in every group. I've done assignments with audio components for years and never had problems with a lack of microphones.

Curriculum/Lesson Plans

I recommend Garr Reynolds' *Presentation Zen* as a book on slide design. As you will be doing many conference presentations in the future, I think this book would be a benefit to all of you. You can assign it for a course. I have used the book in 101. It does a good job of discussing process. However, you can also just use his website: <http://www.garreynolds.com/Presentation/>. I would build some lessons around the basic principles he outlines here. If you are in a lab or projection-ready classroom, you can show slides and discuss them. In other rooms it might be necessary to make some printed handouts. However, I would point out that many of our students

have laptops, so if you ask them to bring them to class, you might have enough for students to work in groups.

You will also want to devote some time to issues of delivery for oral presentations. It is possible that the handbook you select will include some information on this topic. There are also web resources for this subject.

I would plan two-three weeks for this assignment, including a day for workshop. You might ask for student volunteers so that you can discuss as a class.

Proto-Assignment

(I call these proto-assignments as they are meant to be adaptable to your course.)

Take a previous assignment and repurpose it as a 4-5 minute slidecast with at least 15 slides. In 201 this might be a way of presenting a review of the research one has done. You could think about shifting the audience. E.g., students write a proposal about improving a public space; now they do a presentation for a town hall meeting.

Evaluation Criteria

With slidecasts I would focus on the visual design of the slides, oral delivery, and overall rhetorical effectiveness. Reynolds has 10 slide design tips that I think can be reduced to four or five evaluation criteria. With oral delivery you want to consider basic things such as not talking too quickly, sounding like one is reading something, or sounding unprepared. Finally you can consider familiar rhetorical concerns like purpose, audience, structure of argument, etc.

2. Prezi.com

definition: Prezi is a web-based, presentation design tool. With Prezi one uploads existing slides, images, and text and uses the tool to design an animated (Flash-based) navigational path through the presentation. The site provides a full description of how this works.

Production

As with the slidecast, one can use slide presentation software to make slides. Or one could use image-editing software to do the same (e.g. Photoshop, GIMP [an open source Photoshop clone available in 128] or Aviary [a web-based application]). Prezi can include audio and/or video (e.g. embedding YouTube videos).

Production challenges: minimal

The challenges here are similar to those with the slidecast, though perhaps you won't use audio here. You will need to learn how to use the Prezi tool, which is fairly simple. And you and your students will need to create free accounts on Prezi. There is special licensing for educational purposes: <http://prezi.com/profile/signup/edu/>.

Curriculum/Lesson Plans

See the advice for slidecasts. These projects are largely the same. Prezi lends itself to creating a linear presentation. However it does allow for non-linear navigation and the incorporation of things like video. So it offers opportunities for more complexity that you can address in class.

Proto-Assignment

Again, see the advice for slidecasts. I think it is useful to build a presentation from existing material.

Evaluation Criteria

One more time, see slidecast advice. Here however, it's possible to have more text on the screen, and you might not have an audio component. You have to decide if you want to limit your students to doing specific things: e.g. text and images only. Or if you want to *require* them to include audio or embed an existing video. These decisions would be reflected in your criteria. A Prezi is somewhere between a slidecast and a website, which is the next example.

3. Website

definition: obvious, in general terms. Specifically here though I am thinking of using a template-driven application.

Production

There are a number of potential places where one can create websites. Here are two: <http://www.wix.com/> and <http://sites.google.com/>. Wix is a Flash-driven site. Both will require the creation of free accounts. If you want to do a website project, I suggest you evaluate both and select the one that you think works best for you and the kind of project you want to make. You will also likely need some image-editing software to edit images for inclusion on the site.

Production Challenges: moderate

Even with template-driven website creation, these projects have more moving parts and more options. That means potentially more creativity and opportunity, but it also means, potentially, more technical problems and more design issues your students will face. I've been doing web design in first-year composition for more than a decade, so I know it can be done. But I also know that you will get some poorly designed websites. Whichever tool you select, you should use it to create a website for yourself. Try out all the different features. Also, you might want to have students work in groups.

Curriculum/Lesson Plans

With web design there are essentially two elements: the design of the page and the design/organization of the site. With page design, you will want to focus on readability and usability. Readability is affected by things like color choice and font selection. Usability is largely a matter of site navigation. Depending on the handbook you choose, it may include some advice on composing websites. I might consider ordering a book on design for your class. Not one on learning HTML or anything like that. Just something that talks about issues of design and usability. I have used Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think* in the past. I suggest going to the bookstore and browsing.

With site design, the main thing is that all the pages should appear similar enough to give the site some visual cohesion and identity. Secondly, the organization of the pages needs to make sense rhetorically. It shouldn't just be "page 1," "page 2," etc.

Overall, I think a website is likely a three-week project, and you will want to plan some time for troubleshooting and workshopping in class. Again, you will be better off with a projection-ready classroom, some lab time, and having students bring laptops to class.

Proto-assignment

This will depend on whether you are doing groups or not. But for individuals, I might say a minimum of three web pages and 750 words. Each page should include text, a unique image, and one link off the site. The site will also require navigation (e.g. a menu/nav bar). You could also ask them to embed a video or other media if you choose. For 201, a website might be a version of the annotated bibliography. Or it could be a web companion to the research paper (just like many books have companion websites these days): extra material and such. For 101, I would more likely go with revising a previous assignment for a new audience.

Evaluation Criteria

My main advice is don't expect too much. Meeting the minimal technical requirements of the assignment. Readability and usability as you cover it in your curriculum. Then also the rhetorical concerns of audience and purpose.

4. Webzine/Blog

definition: here we are using a blogging platform to create a webzine.

Production

There are many blogging platforms out there. I recommend WordPress. It is free. You can create a site that is public or private. It is more robust, though maybe more complicated, than Blogger, in my opinion. As with a web project, you will probably use some image-editing software to prepare images for the site. Optionally you can include other media and thus might need other applications.

Production Challenges: moderate

The production challenges will depend on how you take up the options available to you. You can create a very visually and media-rich, professional webzine with Wordpress, but it requires some technical chops. Alternately it is quite easy to set up a straightforward, template-driven blog. I term this moderate because I think you will need to devote some time to exploring Wordpress so that you can make an informed decision about what you want to do. In particular you will need to identify and customize a Wordpress template theme for the webzine. This is something you could do as part of your class. Alternately, if there are a number of instructors interested in doing webzines, you could work together, potentially even creating a single webzine across your classes.

Curriculum/Lesson Plans

Unlike the previous three projects, I see this one as running alongside other writing projects for a longer period of time, five weeks or more. As such, you would want to devote a class or two at the beginning of the project, then sprinkle in a few along the way (or maybe just incorporate some discussion into a part of a class each week), and then a day at the end to review the project. You will want to review existing webzines and blogs and discuss how they function. Depending on how much freedom you want to give the students over the design of the webzine itself, you will need to discuss issues of design (see the discussion of the website above).

Proto-assignment

Part of the challenge here is organizational. A webzine will have sections, like a magazine. Each section will need an editor (which could rotate) and content providers. The creator of an entry could be responsible for text, images, and other media, or you could divide those tasks. Here's how I would approach it. The students can identify sections/topics with your approval. Each section has to have 4-6 people. Each week, 1-2 are editors (you decide). Each week, the other students produce an article. You can extend the sequence to every two weeks if you want them to write longer articles or if you feel like it's too much work in the context of other projects. The pieces are peer-reviewed by the editors, revised, and published. For 201, the articles should clearly relate to their research projects, perhaps dealing with current events.

Evaluation Criteria

Students can be evaluated for their individual blog contributions. They can be evaluated as groups for their sections. And they can be evaluated for the overall quality of the webzine. Depending on how much technical challenge you want to incorporate, you can ask them to embed videos, conduct polls, and include other widgets (mini-applications you can embed on the site). Their posts/articles should include links to other websites. You could also require them to comment on articles in other sections.

5. Wiki Project

definition: as you probably know, a wiki is a web application that makes it easy for users to create and edit web pages.

Production

There are a number of free wiki applications. I use <http://pbworks.com/>. My site is <http://thedigitalage.pbworks.com/>. You can create a free educational account here and then invite your students to join the wiki. Again, you should familiarize yourself with the various tools of the wiki you choose to use. In addition, as with other projects, you might use image-editing software.

Production Challenges: minimal

These wikis are very easy to use in technical terms. I think the primary challenges for these projects are organizational and rhetorical.

Curriculum/Lesson Plans

As with the blogging/webzine project, I see this as a longer, background project, five weeks or more. You will devote a day or two to introducing the wiki, address it from time to time, and then review the project at the end. You will need to figure out an organization scheme to your wiki that makes sense in relation to other projects in the course. Also you will need to devote time in class to discussing how users should go about collaborating on wiki pages. Collaboration is the great feature and great challenge of wikis.

Proto-assignment

A wiki project makes a lot of sense to me in a 201 where the students are engaged in thematically related research projects. The wiki then becomes a place for sharing their research with each other and with a larger audience. I would create a baseline requirement such as each user needs to create a new page and substantively contribute to an existing page each week. Then I would create a rotating group of wiki editors. Their weekly job would be to manage the organization of the site. PBworks, for example, allows for the creation of folders (each page can be placed into a folder), as well as tags that can be freely added to each page. You can also create category or master pages that can provide an organizational framework to the site. The editors would be in charge of that updating.

Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation is difficult with a wiki project. I ask each user to create an individual user page where they are responsible for creating a record of their contributions (e.g., pages created and substantively edited). Of course edits will come and go. You can track the history of those edits if you like, but it can be labor intensive. You can even get email updates of wiki changes. You might ask students to write some reflective statement. But in the end, the wiki is a collaborative project and students need to be evaluated for their collaborative efforts.