Visual Metadiscourse: Designing the Considerate Text

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Visual metadiscourse can provide design criteria for authors when considering the needs and expectations of readers. The linguistic concept of metadiscourse is expanded from the textual realm to the visual realm, where authors have many necessary design considerations as they attempt to help readers navigate through and understand documents. These considerations, both textual and visual, also help construct the ethos of authors, as design features reveal awareness of visual literacy and of the communication context. Visual metadiscourse complements textual metadiscourse in emphasizing the necessity of rhetoric in technical communication.

Metadiscourse occurs within the realm of writing; we may verify its presence by words, sentences, and paragraphs. Definitions and classifications of metadiscourse have been proposed by William Vande Kopple (“Some Exploratory”); Avon Crismo; Crismo, Raija Markkanen, and Margaret Steffensen (“Metadiscourse in Persuasive”; “Metadiscourse in Popular”); and Bernadette Longo, who explain its usefulness during the writing process for helping readers interpret and understand textual content. Metadiscourse helps writers arrange content by providing cues and indicators that both help readers proceed through and influence their reception of texts. For example, metadiscourse occurs with phrases such as “The next section discusses . . . .” In this example, the phrase provides a boundary by separating that which has come before from that which is to follow. To omit this use of metadiscourse in the text would blur the separation of content, making the text less cohesive and less considerate of readers. The importance of a considerate text was argued by R. N. Kantor, T. H. Anderson, and B. B. Armbruster as they pointed out how inconsiderate some children’s textbooks can be. This idea of a considerate text blends with the purpose of metadiscourse, as writers may use metadiscourse to make their text more helpful for readers. Presumably, a considerate text will result in part from a thorough audience analysis.
Previous discussions of metadiscourse have focused on the text, as if it encompasses only words, sentences, and paragraphs. However, authorial influence extends beyond these boundaries of metadiscourse to include visual elements of a text such as layout, color, and typography. Computer software has added these document features into the definition of texts, texts produced by many categories of writers, including students of technical writing. A longtime observer of metadiscourse, Joseph Williams, writes in his popular Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace that “we need some metadiscourse in everything we write because it helps us to explain ourselves and to manage how our readers follow and understand us” (89). This observation and many other discussions of metadiscourse examine words and sentences in the abstract, not necessarily with respect to how they look and the visual context in which they appear. Because visual factors also constitute the text, we must inquire how metadiscourse affects the visual decisions and subsequent visual control student writers exert on their documents. The visual is now part of Williams’ “everything we write,” and one way to teach the results of this control relies on an expanded application of metadiscourse and its pedagogic purpose that includes visual factors as well as the abstract representation of words, hence the term “visual metadiscourse.”

Categories of Textual Metadiscourse

Before discussing metadiscourse in the visual realm, I briefly review its use with words and sentences. My later discussion of visual metadiscourse requires an awareness of accepted definitions of metadiscourse as applied to words and relies on Vande Koppel’s classification, which accompanies most recent discussions. Williams defines metadiscourse as “writing about writing” or “discourse about discourse” (89), and Vande Koppel urges us to hypothetically separate language into two parts: (1) the propositional content of a text, sometimes called the facts or statements carrying truth values, to be proved true or false; and (2) the metadiscourse or the human influence upon that propositional content as it is packaged and processed for dissemination (“Some Exploratory” 83).

Figure 1 shows Vande Koppel’s seven classifications, which he grouped into two general categories of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse. The textual category includes words writers use to strengthen cohesion (connectives) and define unfamiliar words (code glosses). Vande Koppel states that items in this category fulfill an “enabling function, that of creating text, which is language in operation as distinct from strings of words or isolated sentences and clauses” (“Metadiscourse” 242). Omission of these items by writers may make the text more difficult to read and less cohesive. The second and much larger group describes the interpersonal functions of metadiscourse, in which the words reveal authorial attitudes and authorial appeals for belief. Use of items in the interpersonal category shows
Seven Kinds of Metadiscourse

Textual

1. Connectives—reveal organization and intertextuality. Examples: first, next, however, as I noted in Chapter One.
2. Code Glosses—parenthetical definitions within sentences.

Interpersonal

3. Illocution Markers—identify discourse acts. Examples: I hypothesize that, to sum up, we claim, for example, we conclude, we recommend.
4. Validity markers—assess the probability of truth of the propositional content.
   a. hedges—perhaps, may, might, often, usually, apparently.
   b. emphatics—clearly, undoubtedly, it is obvious that, of course, very, crucial.
   c. attributors—"according to Einstein."
7. Commentary—direct comments to the reader. Examples: "The reasons for these choices are simple." "Most of you will oppose the idea that . . . ."


Figure 1. William J. Vande Kopple's seven kinds of metadiscourse.

that a writer is seeking to establish a relationship with readers, that communication is indeed occurring between two human beings, and that the writer is not describing unmediated facts. Vande Kopple describes this second category as mediation in the form of social interplay (242).

A need for metadiscourse in the visual realm in technical writing has grown due to the influence of computers and their increased graphics capabilities. These capabilities give students more control of the rhetoric of their documents, but with that increased control comes a responsibility for its use. Twenty years ago, most technical writing classes acknowledged visuals, but those visuals were secondary to text. Moreover, most students then could not import visuals into the text, but rather saved them in an appendix. Students were limited by the capabilities of their typewriters, which meant that visual embellishments consisted of underlining and indentation. That limitation changed considerably with the introduction of computers. Now, students using computers can produce technical documents that visually resemble reports published professionally, making these
students true desktop publishers (Kumpf and Emanuel). However, although the potential exists for students to imitate professional layouts, their visual ability often is myopic. Without corrective instruction, many students use the graphic capabilities of the computer to create visual tones inconsistent with those of the text. For example, haphazard placement of visuals interferes with the readability of the text, often forcing readers to skip forward and backward to examine the visuals mentioned in the text. Many students often overdo embellishments such as borders, lines, and shading, thus producing documents that are visually cluttered. Font choice can also create an inappropriate tone. In addition, students imitating a format used in a professional journal may unknowingly use 12-point type, wide margins, and wide leading in their two-column format, thus making their product look "awkward" or rough, a poor imitation. In such cases their text may be clear and at times vigorous, but the rhetoric in the visual realm of the document detracts from the textual competency, much like viewing a reading of Eliot's The Waste Land given by a cartoon character. In this case the visual experience would jar with the auditory experience and create a disjointed whole text.

Categories of Visual Metadiscourse

Vande Kopple's categories of textual metadiscourse provide a basis on which to expand metadiscourse into the visual realm. Once students of technical writing see the usefulness of a theory of metadiscourse with respect to their words and sentences, the expansion to visual decisions in a document should then seem consistent and necessary. Vande Kopple proposed seven categories for his explorations of metadiscourse; I am suggesting ten ad hoc categories with which writers may make decisions on visual ways in which they may help readers understand and interpret the whole document. I base my categories on the criterion that they represent areas in which writers can exert control or choice in varying degrees. For example, textual metadiscourse often represents a choice by the writer to use or not to use. Each of the seven textual categories can provide screens through which writers can assess a text for metadiscourse in textual and interpersonal areas. Likewise, visual categories may provide more screens, but in a different realm, the visual realm, through which writers can consider whether or not design choices support readability and macrostructural consistency. This macrostructural consistency is part of what Charles Kostelnick calls the "supra-textual" effect of a document, an effect that initially "screens our entry into a document" ("Supra-Textual" 24) and once engaged, works with the rhetoric of the text to present to the reader a consistent whole. I suggest my ten ad hoc categories based on nine years of grading many student documents in technical writing classes. I do not intend my list to be comprehensive, but exploratory, as was Vande Kopple's first discussion and categorization of metadiscourse. These categories of visual meta-
discourse apply to hardcopy documents as well as to those online. They are

- first impression
- heft
- convention
- chunking
- external skeleton
- consistency
- expense
- attraction
- interpretation
- style

The titles of these categories are not new to technical writing and document design. We have seen previously the use of the terms “convention,” “consistency,” and “external skeleton” to define and describe textual characteristics. For example, we often urge students to be consistent with font choices or strengthen an external skeleton as if the results were intended to improve the product, the text. These familiar terms now assume a different purpose in the realm of visual metadiscourse, where they become identifiers of ways to help the writer manage the visual reception of the document. The manifestations of the use of these categories should not end in the text but in the relationship with readers. Herein lies another similarity to textual metadiscourse, where many of the terms are not new to composition study but take on different uses and meanings when viewed as channels of authorial influence toward readers. Moreover, these visual categories describe areas of authorial choice in documents, choices that reveal information about authors, as the language they are using is also using them.

First Impression

Encountering a document for the first time evokes the concept of alterity: by bringing into being that which is, we also declare that which is not (Dobrin 239). For example, consider a student document, say, a proposal on white paper with a plain plastic cover. Once inside, we flip through the pages and see the predicted MLA, single-column, double-spaced format. This does not take long, perhaps five seconds, yet we have already decided many things about the document that will influence our later impressions. We at once know many things about what the document is not: it is not commercially printed and may not engage us with the plain cover and collegiate appearance. If we had other hopes or predictions, this introduction denies them.

We may compare the first impression to the term “curb appeal” used by realtors, a term that refers to the feeling prospective buyers have when viewing a house while still in the car parked at the curb, or in some cases in the driveway. The curb appeal ranges from attraction to repulsion, based on the expectations of the prospective buyers. Curb appeal describes how well the house shows from the road or driveway during its first impression. In this system, a “fixer-upper” in a deteriorating neighborhood for most shoppers has less curb appeal than a stately, brick, two-story house that may appear on a cover of Country Living. Nevertheless, the former may be preferable to
the latter if the shopper has little money to spend, making the fixer-upper, in an economic sense, more appealing. The first impression of a document, in varying degrees, influences its reception before the reader reads the first word. As Kostelnick writes, “We see documents before we read them: this initial encounter evokes an aesthetic response but one with immediate practical consequences” (‘Rhetoric’ 200). Our reading of a document often depends on the visual cues that the document offers, especially initially. Ann M. Gill and Karen Whedbee state that “an expectation of genre establishes the rhetorical parameters of a text, determining not only its structure but also its vocabulary, syntax, argumentative moves and narrative appeals. The speaker who oversteps these parameters, betraying audience expectations, often provokes a negative response” (164).

The expectations of which Gill and Whedbee write may occur visually in the first impression, expectations that will set a tone for the entire document. The overstepping of the parameters may occur when a student decides to place her document in a commercial format, perhaps imitating a journal layout. In this case, the textual and visual content of the original, the journal, has passed before various gatekeepers such as peer reviewers and editors prior to publication. A student may overstep a parameter by adopting a professional appearance but failing to adequately proofread the content, thus delivering text that fails to meet the high standards evoked by its professional appearance. The reader may have been led to expect a polished document but was betrayed by the mistakes in the written text. Teachers of technical writing may use this category to emphasize the contradiction that may occur when software and hardware capabilities exceed writing skill. Students may produce visually appealing documents that may imitate professional ones, but fail to also imitate and deliver good writing. In visual metadiscourse, students should realize the need for audience analysis as they consider a first impression and its rhetorical effect on the reader. First impressions may signal that the document is another instance in a routine, such as in an interoffice memo. In this case the visual influence of the writer may be predetermined by convention and require little creativity. On the other hand, a document such as an annual report or a Web site may require much creativity for a good first impression, as the author must choose from a seemingly limitless range of choices for a design that attracts and engages the audience.

This first category of visual metadiscourse also signals a trait shared by most of the other categories, in that they are inherent to a document whether in hardcopy or online. To take a first impression as an example, we must admit that each document will have a first impression. To be admitted into the realm of existence for the reader, the document must have a first appearance that will have some effect upon readers. A document cannot not have a first impression. It may fail to move the reader at all, may evoke a dislike, or may make a positive impression, but it will have some effect on the reader. This shared trait of inherency among many of the categories makes visual
metadata discourse different than textual metadata discourse. In textual metadata discourse it is possible for many of the categories to be absent in a text. Every text is not required to have code glosses, narrators, or validity markers. The inherency of visual metadata discourse perhaps makes it easier to apply and discuss in every text and requires its consideration in every document. We cannot prescribe that students include the categories of emphatics or hedges in their documents because the context and content of the document may not require it. Yet we can prescribe the consideration of a first impression and use this category to support discussions of interaction with readers.

**Heft**

Closely related to the first impression is heft, a concept similar to the bulk or length of a document. For example, the telephone book for a large suburb of Chicago has a large heft, so much so that its size may intimidate many users. At the other extreme, a post-it note has very little heft. In many cases, heft influences the reception of a document. Documents deemed too long for the subject may not be read. For example, consumers expect a short instruction booklet to accompany the unassembled wheelbarrow they just bought. If the booklet consists of 20 pages, its excessive heft may prevent readers from consulting it, choosing instead to figure it out for themselves. In this example, a single-sheet exploded diagram with perhaps a few hundred words of interpretative text may satisfy an appropriate level of heft. At the other extreme, a document may have too little heft. For example, a 2-page student text on redesigning a complex robotic assembly line is probably too short for the topic. Engineers familiar with the assembly line may expect much more heft, perhaps 30 or more pages. When texts are given word length or context, that text is therefore assigned a heft. Writers who significantly deviate from an assigned or expected heft may also influence positively or negatively the first impression.

Heft assumes more significance in hardcopy, when users may see the entire document at once, than online, when users initially may see only one screen, often a home page, as the first impression. The heft of a Web site is easily obscured by the medium of the Internet, since users often cannot determine the length and complexity of a site until they access it and begin browsing through links.

Students can control heft by the format they choose in designing a document. For example, consider a 30-page text that conforms to the MLA format of a single column, is double-spaced, and is printed on one side of a sheet of paper. A writer may greatly reduce the heft of this document by reformatting it into two columns with single spacing and printing text on both sides of the sheet. The document that was 30 pages may now be a third as much, perhaps 10 pages.

In most hardcopy documents, reader reaction from perceptions of heft occur simultaneously with the first impression, for it is then that we may see the boundaries of the document. Heft is often external to a
document; however, the heft of multiple texts within a document is a little harder to assess. For example, readers must flip through the pages of journal articles to assess their heft, or read the page lengths in the table of contents. In this case, the first impression of an article in a journal will have passed through the first impression of the document as a whole before reaching the individual article.

Heft has size, shape, quantity, and often weight, factors that readers may expect in a document, a circumstance that then imposes constraints on the writer to fulfill them.

**Convention**

This concept describes what readers expect from the appearance of a document. Kostelnick and David Roberts write, "... when you design a document or you read it 'visually,' you tap into a variety of conventions that govern its language" (34). For example, we expect a student paper to appear in the MLA format for research papers: double-spaced, single-column, one-sided printing. We expect an interoffice memo to have an address/date/topic block at the top of the first page and be from one to three pages in heft. We expect commercial advertising to be slick and glossy. Convention consists of expectations based on what we have seen before in documents and how they are grouped into genres, some of which are described above. The convention of a document influences the first impression, cueing the reader regarding what to expect based on its similarity or dissimilarity with other documents. Writers use convention as a rhetorical strategy by which they tailor their documents to a genre, resembling here a gestalt principle of similarity (like objects will be grouped together) (Moore and Fitz 149).

Convention has been influenced by student use of computers, allowing the students to mimic formats used by journals. For example, a student paper that in the 1980s appeared in an MLA format can now look like a reprint from a journal, using single-spaced, two- or three-column format, and printing on both sides of the page. Students can also use similar design features such as embellishments, shading, lines, and photos to make their document look "professional." In this sense, the students rely on convention to include their document in the group named "professional document."

Convention may also restrict design choices by student writers by limiting the styles deemed acceptable by the discourse community. To choose to work within a convention means that a writer is seeking acceptance by other members who also use that convention and that the writer assumes the boundaries and implications of that convention. Students who write an assignment in the format of an interoffice memo should realize that violating the convention of the memo may mean that the document will not convey the same authority as documents that do conform to convention. For example, many office settings have a convention for the appearance of memos, a convention
that may be understated in order to fit the formality of business and to convey professionalism. A writer who adds a large comic character at the top of the first page may risk alienating her audience because she affronted convention. The unconventional visual signals that the document and its content may somehow be defective according to the standards of the audience.

Like the two previous categories of first impression and heft, documents will inherently be assessed based on convention. Even a document deemed unconventional is judged based on its reference to other documents that are conventional. Writers cannot escape convention even if they are seeking to be unconventional. Generally, students of technical writing, especially engineering majors, seek to conform to the convention of their professional societies and publications. The student desire to conform often manifests itself in textual style through dependence on passive and third-person voice. With computers, these students may also seek to conform to visual conventions, a conformance that requires that the students know the visual conventions of the discourse community they seek to join. This awareness of convention can help students assemble their portfolios as they apply for jobs. Students may design their sample documents, whether they be memos, progress reports, or proposals, using professional-looking formats to show prospective employers that they know the visual conventions of their field. Moreover, students show their use of computers and visual rhetoric by adopting a professional format, a knowledge that expands the understanding of the phrase, “good communication skills.”

**Chunking**

Writers may visually help readers through a document by arranging text into discrete visual parts. This is commonly manifested in the shape of a paragraph and this concept can extend to all visual levels of a document, from the sentence, to paragraphs, sections, and chapters. A considerate writer will chunk items into visual parts to help readers identify the constituent parts of a document and to show the boundaries of related items, such as related sentences in a paragraph, related paragraphs in a section, and related sections in a chapter.

Chunking as interpreted through visual metadiscourse helps provide visual relief in a document by allowing the readers to process the content in parts rather than as a continuous flow of text without breaks. Our written language provides a foundation for this concept by the spaces between words. We need the spaces to separate words so that we may distinguish between them and process their collective presence into understanding. To omit the spaces places a great burden on the reader. We may extend the same principle to the indentation of paragraphs. Chunking prevents long stretches of text that may make the reader think the document is dense and therefore too difficult to read. We may think of an interoffice memo five pages long without paragraph
breaks and the resulting density this creates to illustrate the necessity of chunking.

The examples so far with respect to sentences and paragraphs are examples of chunking with which student writers should already be familiar. Teachers may build on this foundation to show students how chunking extends beyond this level to design decisions in layout. For example, an old maxim in technical writing suggests, “Go no more than three pages without a heading and have no more than three headings per page.” This maxim addresses two parts of chunking: (1) the need for chunking to prevent text from becoming dense, and (2) a warning to avoid over-chunking that may give documents an unnecessary airy look and unintentionally separate related parts. I have seen students over-chunk documents to the point that documents resemble lists, lists often accompanied by bullets. Student writers may think that they are helping readers by providing generous amounts of white space to “open up” the text for quick use, but this often occurs at the expense of affronting convention and omitting needed explanations and connections among the many items in these lists.

Chunking relies on the gestalt principle of closure (Moore and Fitz 142), whereby items within a boundary will be considered complete and related. Writers often create these boundaries with white space, boxes, colors, or lines. Chunking occurs in degrees, as suggested earlier, and the degree to which chunking occurs in a document is often linked to the convention of the document and the needs of the readers. Convention may suggest that bulleted lists in proposals may appear in moderation, but should not constitute the bulk of the document. Conversely, a short informal memo may work best as a bulleted list. We see closure around individual letters, words, and sentences all the way to the external closure of a document, whether it is bounded by a report cover, screen size or scroll length if online, or left.

Teachers may use the principle of chunking to help students recognize its use at all levels of a document and how students may use it as a part of their interaction with the readers. As metadiscourse, chunking appears in the document in order to help the reader. Items are chunked not because the text requires it but because it may improve the writer-reader relationship.

**External Skeleton**

Readers assess the organization of a document based on its external skeleton. Conventional examples of the “bones” of an external skeleton include page numbers, headings, tables of contents, running headers or footers, paragraph indentations, and chapter markers. These and other visual cues quickly show readers how the document is assembled, reflecting at any given place in the document where they are in relation to the rest of the document. The complexity of an external skeleton depends upon the genre of the document. For example, an essay may require a simple external skeleton, relying
mainly on the visual cues of *convention* and *chunking* described above, leaving the degree of its cohesion to the strength of its internal skeleton. At the other extreme, a technical report written for management may need all of the "bones" as described above to accommodate "executive" readers who rely heavily on the *first impression* and skim through the rest of the document to find the pertinent information they need to make decisions (Souther 1963). In this example, the *external skeleton* may show readers that the conclusion and recommendations of the report are in the front—not in the back—thus placing the most important part of the document up front and leaving its remaining sections for explanations and discussions.

 Writers working toward a considerate text must consider the audience and genre of the document to determine the complexity of its *external skeleton*. The genre of the document often determines this complexity, as the two examples discussed above show. In the latter example, writers must decide among the many choices available in computer software, relying sometimes on *convention* for guidance to ensure that the cues are appropriate for the genre.

 The *external skeleton* relies much on *chunking* because the visual separation caused by *chunking* helps identify the parts of the skeleton. In a sense, the *external skeleton* is an extension of *chunking* because it labels groups of related parts, as in headings and chapter titles. A strong *external skeleton* in a long document, say, a proposal, may also help writers organize sections and paragraphs so that related topics are grouped together and identified. Writers may use the headings as reminders and locators to prevent wandering away from the labeled topic.

 Teachers may use the idea of the *external skeleton* to link visual metadiscourse to textual metadiscourse. Teachers can show students that documents have an internal skeleton as well as an external one, with the many categories of textual metadiscourse providing cues for the internal skeleton. A strong internal skeleton helps strengthen textual cohesion as readers are guided through the content, often relying on textual categories of metadiscourse such as connectives, illocutionary markers, and commentary. All of these influence cohesion so that readers may understand the internal parts of a document and how they connect and are related. The two skeletons complement each other, and we may say that a document strong in both areas is effective, for it has accommodated readers as they first approach a document and skim through it, as well as when they have decided to begin reading. The use of the external skeleton remains long after a *first impression*. In long documents, the *external skeleton* as shown by headings also provides cues for *chunking* and signals upcoming topics.

 **Consistency**

 This visual element of metadiscourse borrows much from the gestalt principle of similarity mentioned earlier, manifested here in a
reader’s tendency to see unity in a document that maintains a consistent style or tone. Returning again to a document in MLA format, its consistency is revealed through the prescribed features such as double-spacing, single-column pages, and one-sided printing. Once readers see the initial organization, consistency helps them prepare for upcoming pages. Consistency provides a constant on which to organize and view the new information provided by the text. An analogy to visual consistency occurs in the textual prescription for parallel constructions in multiple dependent clauses, in which whatever part of speech begins the first clause must be repeated in following clauses until the end of the sentence, hence, the sentence as follows:

We must correct deficiencies in the primary slack time, identifying the problem, seeking possible recommendations, and implementing our chosen solution.

The first of the three final free modifiers in the sample sentence began with a gerund. To stay parallel or consistent, the last two must also begin with a gerund.

Documents can display visual consistency on many levels, from using the same font throughout the document, to maintaining a hierarchy of headings and subheadings, to selecting visuals. In the latter example, students may affront consistency by using visuals inconsistent with the tone of the text and format. For example, libraries of clip art in many software applications offer users many choices for embellishing documents or providing visual relief to visually dense sections of text. These choices may relate in content to the text, say, a line drawing of a bull for use in a memo on the stock market, yet that drawing may be cartoonish and convey a comical instead of a formal tone. This lapse in consistency we may then call "promiscuous," reviving a secondary meaning of the word that describes something composed of diverse and unrelated parts.

Consistency helps readers discern cohesion, seeing the document as a unified whole whose parts support a common theme instead of wandering and wavering among embellishments and stylistic choices. The temptation to wander is often strong with student writers, who have access to many choices in their word processing or desktop publishing software. The availability of color also increases chances for inconsistency as students may choose too many colors for lines, boxes, and shading and thus disrupt hierarchy and weaken the cohesion of an external skeleton. Consistency relates to Kathryn Riley and Frank Parker's use of continuity as they link it to H. P. Grice's maxim of relation in his Cooperative Principle, whereby readers "expect items in a discourse to be related" (176). Consistency, continuity, and relation all describe the visual coherence of a document, a coherence that perhaps satisfies a modernist appeal for order and unity. Documents affronting consistency may also affront chunking because the inconsistency may signal an unintended closure or boundary of chunked data. Items that the writer may intend to be related may be
unintentionally separated by inconsistency in font style or size, changes in color for lines or boxes, or genres of photos and drawings.

Expense

The physical and aesthetic realms of expense affect the reader's reception of a document, and expense is the part of visual metadiscourse most influenced by money; that is, the expense of paper, printing, and visuals, among other things. In these areas the author influences the document, with the presumption that the author with much to spend has more choices in this category. For example, a student paper submitted on inexpensive copier paper "feels" cheaper than the same text submitted on heavyweight bond, as if the latter reveals more polish and an eye for presentation, the author valuing the message and reader enough to dress for the occasion.

Expense depends on context. Returning to the same example, a rough draft or draft in progress need not appear in full dress. The dress-down feature of the copier paper argues that the text is under construction. Whether considering paper stock, dot-matrix or laser-printed drafts, or color embellishments and pictures, decisions of expense reveal much about the author: his place among the recursion of the writing process, his attitude toward the subject and audience, and his ethos, with the concept of alterity also applying here (a document printed on a dot-matrix printer may mean the author can't afford a laser printer). In most writing contexts, unless otherwise stated, conventional advice urges writers to use the highest production quality they can afford (Weiss 229).

The category of expense shares the characteristic of inherency with many of the other categories of visual metadiscourse described earlier. Writers cannot escape an assessment of expense in their documents because factors such as the qualities of paper, ink, and production are built into each document. Expense may be diminished in routine documents such as interoffice memos where convention and consistency mask consideration of production costs. This circumstance existed before the prevalence of computers when students produced their documents on typewriters with all of their limitations. The typewriter imposed a leveling effect on student documents because it prevented use of the many layout choices and embellishments available then only from expensive commercial printing. A student document looked much less expensive submitted by a student than if the same text appeared as a published article in a magazine or journal, where factors such as typesetting, format, and ink quality raised the significance of the text. Texts in commercial-looking formats had made the cut, earning the approval of editors and other gatekeepers before those texts could be transformed by the professional appearance.

Teachers may use the category of expense to describe the consistency expected of documents between their appearance and the quality of writing. With computers, many students may find it easier to look professional than to write professionally.
Attraction

Authors may engage readers through the *first impression*, as discussed earlier, initiating a response that ranges from high interest and continued reading to no interest and no further contact with the document. *Attraction* describes the ability to maintain readers once engaged, guiding them through the document, and if needed, to its end. Writers accomplish this textually through the internal skeleton, much like the skill of good novelists and poets; however, the same may be accomplished visually, relying on other categories of visual metadiscourse such as *consistency*, *chunking*, and the *external skeleton*. The term *attraction* does not apply here in the sense of the *first impression*, but instead describes a feature that pulls in readers, encouraging them to continue past the *first impression*. *Attraction* may be compared to the idea of a magnet, pulling readers into the heart of the text. It compels readers to see what's next, manifesting itself as the visual counterpart of the text connective in textual metadiscourse, letting readers know what one is on the verge of presenting. *Consistency* supports *attraction*, and together they support cohesion.

For example, consider the simple three-panel brochure shown in Figure 2. The cover must employ the *first impression* to attract the reader with the anticipation of something interesting inside. *Attraction* then takes over, causing the reader to open the front panel to reveal the gate panel. An example of visual *attraction* now occurs to draw the reader further into the brochure. In the example, the gate panel hides what we perceive as a completed visual. We then are attracted by the obscured lines and open the gate panel to see the visual in its entirety. The lines of the balloon strings and the line of the horizon urge us to continue these lines beyond their ending points, thereby attracting us further in. This example shows a use of *attraction* in a short document, but the sense of uncompleted closure may be extended by pictures to longer documents. For example, an engineering proposal that relies heavily on drawings or photographs to describe the progress of a design change may use the photographs in sequence over many pages to lead readers into the document. Each photographed or drawn step along the way builds on previous information. A compact example of this may include assembly instructions in which each successive picture carries the process one step further. Some assembly instructions rely exclusively on the visual *attraction* so that no text is required; users follow the sequence of visuals.

*Attraction* may support the idea of a linear text, that the most important part or conclusion of the document occurs at the end. Pictures in sequence create a sense of flow from the beginning of the document to the end. *Attraction* can help pull disinterested readers beyond the title page by providing visual summaries of discussions of the content. Moreover, a photograph on every page may be enough to attract readers through a text, as may occur in articles in *The National Geographic*, where readers may skim the text from beginning to end based on the presence of photographs and perhaps return to the
beginning to read the text if the photographs have piqued their interest. Student writers may misuse attraction by clumping photographs or visuals at the beginning of a long document and complete it with many text-only pages. Frequent visuals at the beginning create expectations by readers that the visuals will continue. To fail in this consistency may also fail to attract readers through the document. Applied consistently, attraction may provide symmetry or balance to a document as readers see visuals placed throughout. The resulting balance may support the idea that the document is finished or complete, that more photos are not remaining to be inserted.

**Interpretation**

This feature of visual metadiscourse applies to tables, graphs, and photos. Many students will frequently include any one of these visuals without interpreting them in the text. For example, in the many cases where one of these visuals can efficiently organize data, many students will note the visual by stating, “Results are shown in the graph below,” and assume the visual is self-interpreting, requiring no further explana-
tion. However, much more is usually needed to explain the significance of the data and its relation to the purpose of the text. Some students mistakenly assume that because they know the importance of the graph, the reader will also understand its significance, and then the students fail to include interpretative text.

*Interpretation* exists within the text and is not a visual feature like the other areas of visual metadiscourse, yet it affects the usefulness and purpose of visuals such as photos, graphs, and tables. *Interpretation* is similar to commentary in textual metadiscourse and thus provides a salient way to show authorial control and presence in the document. Perhaps *interpretation* should be considered as textual metadiscourse, maybe a subcategory of commentary; however, its inclusion in visual metadiscourse points toward visual concerns and seeks to improve the use and understanding of visuals.

The categories of *interpretation* and commentary are perhaps the two categories that best help define and illustrate the general concept of metadiscourse. They both show a separation of content, what Vande Kopple calls “the propositional content,” from metadiscourse, the “writing about writing.” When interpreting a graph in the text, writers acknowledge that the facts, data, or information cannot exist on their own and must be interpreted. With *interpretation*, writers help control the interpretive process of the reader. Unlike many of the other categories of visual metadiscourse, *interpretation* does not reside inherently in a document. A writer must deliberately include it, which supports this category as illustrative of metadiscourse. Moreover, *interpretation* explains how the data represented visually relates to the arguments of the writers and why the data is important.

*Interpretation* links visuals to the text and helps add cohesion between the textual and visual elements. An absence of *interpretation* may place visuals in an ancillary status, reducing their purpose to mere providers of visual relief rather than as necessary to substantive support of the writer’s arguments. We know the value of internal cohesion in texts provided by connectives and topical progression. *Interpretation* adds another purpose for the interpretive text as it contributes to the external cohesion of visuals with the whole document. *Interpretation* allows text to support visuals, just the opposite of conventional thinking, in which visuals support the text.

**Style**

Discussions and admonitions about textual style—and there are many—also apply to visual style, where the choices of software allow students much freedom. Without computers, student style was limited by the features of the typewriter, a physical boundary that conformed nicely to the prescriptions of the *MLA Handbook*. Computers have changed that greatly, increasing options where once there were few. Instead of uniformity, students may embellish their documents to create their own visual style that will complement their textual style.
Just as we may encounter a wordy textual style in many student papers, we may also encounter its visual equivalent: clutter, defined variously as "overdetermined," "busy," or "excessive." With visual clutter, the excess of an embellishment diminishes a perceived effect. It is the visual manifestation of the dictum by Shakespeare, "A little more than a little is by much too much." Examples include too much of the following: boldface, italics, line width, and color. We urge students to prune excess words from text; likewise, a fresh, clean visual style appeals to understatement and restraint, leaving their opposite manifestations to the realm of advertising copy.

Students help readers through documents by using an appropriate style, one complementary to the tone and subject of the text. For example, *convention* guides us to use conventional fonts, such as the Goudy used here or another serifed variant. These fonts we judge appropriate for scholarly or student texts. Yet the font selections available to students often tempt some to try unconventional fonts for a personal style (shown below), giving us, for example, a review of research on reading aloud to second-graders, whose heading appears in a grunge-font, thus clashing a serious textual tone with a comic visual effect. Not only does this affront consistency, but perhaps style as well, providing the textual equivalent of wearing a striped shirt with plaid pants. This example shows that an inappropriate visual style hurts the ethos of the author, perhaps then suggesting that the content may be similarly flawed. Style as a category of visual metadiscourse refers to the assumptions readers form when seeing documents and judging them according to conventions. Style simultaneously relies on *convention* for judgment and categorization while allowing authors ways to construct an identity and reveal individual preferences as rhetorical choices.

The many options available in visual style provide in some cases much freedom, in others, no freedom. In the latter, a company policy may prescribe the style and format of documents such as memos or reports so that decisions on style are predetermined. In the former, writers should realize that embellishments and stylistic choices are not neutral and contain suggestions and overtones. The freedom to choose a visual style places a responsibility on writers to realize the implications of their choices as these choices relate to the other categories of visual metadiscourse.

Like most of the preceding categories, style inheres in every document, hardcopy and online. A writer cannot escape style, for it will comprise one of many screens through which readers will interpret and receive the document. Williams quotes Jean-Luc Godard in an epigraph: "To me, style is just the outside of content, and content the inside of style, like the outside and inside of the human body—both go together, they can't be separated" (3). Williams intends Godard's
quote in the context of textual style, but it also applies to visual style. Perhaps the quote will be easier to understand in the context of visual metadiscourse because readers will first see the visual style of a document, the outside, before reading the textual style. Whether textual or visual, the style is inseparable from and informs and defines the content. Williams offers advice for writers to improve their textual style, and frequently provides examples of bad style that have buried or confused the content with wordiness or unintelligent use of words. This advice parallels that in the visual realm of a document, where writers also may bury or confuse readers with poor visual choices. In both cases—textual and visual—readers encounter choices, of which some are better than others. Writers improve their textual style by understanding principles of good style based on convention and the way we process English grammar and syntax. They can improve style once they know of its existence and its implications for the text and the effect it has on readers. The same applies to visual style, where students now have more choices and the ability with computers to imitate visual styles in their own documents. As in textual style, the increased choices also create the occasion for misuse.

Style helps writers understand the worlds in which their documents will appear and how writers want to situate their documents and themselves in any of those worlds. Style helps readers recognize and place documents into categories. It is a basis for judgment on how the reader will “read” the document and the ethos of the writer.

Implications of Visual Metadiscourse

Expanding metadiscourse to the visual realm both alters and confirms the concept of metadiscourse as defined for text. An alteration of metadiscourse results from the distinction of metadiscourse words from the content on which they are applied. In Williams’ definition of metadiscourse as “writing about writing,” we see a separation between the writing on one level and writing at the level of metadiscourse. Writing at the first level Vande Kopple calls the propositional content and it may be affected by metadiscourse from any of his seven categories. However, Luming Mao in “I Conclude Not: Toward a Pragmatic Account of Metadiscourse” warns that such distinctions may unnecessarily relegate metadiscourse as a secondary discourse to the primary discourse of the propositional content (265). Perhaps an apt metaphor to show the disjunction Mao warns against would be calling metadiscourse the frosting on the cake of propositional content, in which the cake is the primary and substantive part made palatable by the frosting. Visual metadiscourse supports Mao’s concern that metadiscourse factors as much as the propositional content in the construction of a text; that is, that metadiscourse is inherent in every speech act, sometimes to the extent that the reader is interested because of the metadiscourse. In some discourses, the metadiscourse may be primary, depending on the rhetorical context.
As stated earlier, many of the categories of visual metadiscourse are inherent in a document and will exert varying degrees of persuasion, depending on the context, to the point where the presence and intelligent use of the visual category pleases and entices the reader. Returning to my example of a typical article from *The National Geographic*, its propositional content, stripped as much as possible from the generous degrees of visual metadiscourse in which it appears, may fail to interest the magazine's readers on content alone. Readers make the content significant only when it meets the levels of visual metadiscourse set by the other articles, articles strong in categories such as convention, first impression, and expense, to name a few. For the propositional content to have meaning in context, it must rely on visual metadiscourse, which may at times be the primary discourse. The influence by visual metadiscourse on the distinction between propositional content and metadiscourse may satisfy Mao's goal "to blur the distinction between primary discourse and secondary discourse . . ." (265). The blurring emphasizes the dependency of both levels—the "writing" and the "writing about"—on each other and supports the necessity of the human influence of all communication. It supports the humanistic rationale for technical writing as described by Carolyn Miller by making "human knowledge thoroughly relative and science fundamentally rhetorical" (615).

This inerency of visual metadiscourse categories in documents resists attempts to place the ten categories into two separate groups—textual and interpersonal—as Vande Kopple did with textual metadiscourse. In visual metadiscourse, the textual features, that is, elements required for cohesion and coherence, blend with the interpersonal features whose duties are rhetorical. The ten categories of visual metadiscourse describe areas in a document that authors must confront and choose a rhetorical strategy to fit the context. The visual metadiscourse categories are simultaneously textual and interpersonal.

Visual metadiscourse confirms the textual concept of metadiscourse by supporting the position noted earlier by Williams "that we need some metadiscourse in everything we write . . ." (89). My argument for the inerency of visual metadiscourse in documents may revise and expand this observation by Williams to read, "we need some visual metadiscourse in everything we print, for it helps position our document in a discourse community and among genres of documents. It adds visual cues, reminders, and markers that help readers see cohesion between textual and visual elements."

This link to and confirmation of textual metadiscourse also means that visual metadiscourse shares some abuses of textual metadiscourse. In *Style*, Williams warns writers that excessive metadiscourse causes wordiness and should be pruned. He writes, "... some writers use so much that it buries their ideas" (172). Likewise, writers may overdo the categories of visual metadiscourse so that the document may appear cluttered, overstated, or awkward. Misuse of visual metadiscourse may be caused by the myriad choices students have with computers. For example, students can easily misuse or misjudge
convention by using colors, fonts, and layouts that signal another convention to the reader or that the document may be below par. In another example, students may erroneously strengthen an external skeleton so that excessive chunking occurs that appears as short, underdeveloped paragraphs that look more like lists. In this case an overdeveloped external skeleton may weaken the internal skeleton of the text.

Williams urges writers to trim excessive metadiscourse not because it is ungrammatical, but because it interferes with clarity and economy of words. The trimming thus may contribute to a more readable style and one preferred by readers over untrimmed and more wordy versions. The categories of visual metadiscourse, however, do not appeal to a nationally prescribed visual grammar, where one will be wrong in New Jersey as much as in Nevada. Instead, convention in the form of corporate culture or discourse community will prescribe the guidelines for documents in those contexts. No public visual grammar prescribes that text in 14-point type is as wrong as a misspelled word. Yet, an MLA guideline or company policy may prescribe that text appear in 12-point type, and violators may be corrected.

Metadiscourse and Cooperation

In my description of the visual metadiscourse category of consistency, I referred to Grice’s Cooperative Principle and how Parker and Riley related his maxim of relation to visual fields. Grice framed conversation as cooperation between conversants. We may extend this cooperation to a document, as have Parker and Riley, but now add the function of metadiscourse as a way for writers to plan and assess their role as cooperative communicators. Students of technical writing should see their role as writers less as presenters of facts, whose responsibility ends at delivering supposedly self-interpreting facts, and more as writers who must interact and prepare the text for another human being to read. Once students realize their role, they may see the uses of the categories of textual and visual metadiscourse as they revise and prepare their texts for cooperating with their readers, a cooperation that requires writers to seek awareness of readers’ needs.

Whether we are conversing or writing, we are entering into a relationship with other human beings and we must frame our contributions so that they are intended for understanding by another human being. Toward this idea of relationship, Joseph Harris states in his “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing,” “We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong” (12). Our application of this cognitive framing occurs when we render our communication within Miller’s humanistic aspect of technical writing and within Grice’s Cooperative Principle. They both describe an emerging aspect of technical com-
munication, an aspect that considers a text less as an objective thing-in-itself and more as a means to build, direct, and maintain human relationships and knowledge. Commenting on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Kim Lovejoy writes that "It defines for the student the relationship between writer and reader, and it enables the student, when faced with a writing task, to conceptualize an audience. Writing is cooperative in that writers desire for their intended readers to understand the message being sent" (12). This idea of a relationship is a more common description of what philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a "hermeneutical conversation" (349), a conversation, writes Stanley Grenz, where the cognitive horizons of writer and reader intersect (110).

Recent studies by Xiaoguagn Cheng and Steffensen and Puangpen Intaraprawat and Steffensen describe the improvement in student writing when students write with an awareness of textual metadiscourse. Cheng and Steffensen studied uses of metadiscourse in the texts of students in freshman composition classes. Similarly, Intaraprawat and Steffensen studied the persuasive texts of native-English speakers (NES) and ESL students for uses of metadiscourse. Cheng and Steffensen found that student writers will use metadiscourse intelligently if they have first been introduced to it and taught its categories. Moreover, Intaraprawat and Steffensen found that skilled writers in both the ESL and NES categories used more metadiscourse than did unskilled writers in both of those categories. The two studies differed in that Cheng and Steffensen taught the students metadiscourse, while Intaraprawat and Steffensen did not.

In technical communication studies, Longo compared the texts of student writers and professional writers for uses of metadiscourse. As in the study by Intaraprawat and Steffensen, the texts studied were written by authors not introduced to metadiscourse. Longo found that the professional (expert) writers of proposals in mechanical engineering intelligently used the various categories of metadiscourse to situate themselves within a community of experts in their field, as if they were part of constructing knowledge, citing relevant works (attributors) and qualifying their own assertions (350). These uses portrayed the experts as possessing a different rhetorical stance than did the novice student writers, who used fewer instances of metadiscourse and unintelligently used it to "create the persona of an enthusiastic salesperson addressing the reader directly through the text" (350). Longo's results suggest that the intelligent use of metadiscourse is tied to the skill of the writer only because that writer has a different goal or purpose in writing. That is, writers knowledgeable and secure in their
rhetorical purpose will inherently use metadiscourse intelligently, because as part of the community of experts, they know the strategies used to accommodate new information to critical readers.

I have included discussions of textual metadiscourse in classes in technical writing since 1995 and have noted an improvement in the cohesion and considerateness of student writing after they rethink their role as writers and the necessity of writing for relationship instead of recording a vague sense of objectivity. My students are mostly seniors in industrial, electrical, and civil engineering and they see metadiscourse less as theory and more as a system for improving writing. It gives them categories by which they may assess their text and use as guides for choosing arrangement and content during the writing process. Visual metadiscourse extends these considerations to choices in layout and document design, where students now have many rhetorical choices available, choices that can often influence a document more than a textual choice. Since developing and experimenting with visual metadiscourse a few years ago, I have always introduced it to students after discussions of textual metadiscourse, as if to acknowledge the origin of metadiscourse and teach its early applications to writing. In doing so, I imply that visual metadiscourse relies on a textual base. The general theory of metadiscourse may be introduced, discussed, and taught by relying primarily on the visual realm, especially since most of my ten ad hoc categories are inherent in every document, whereas textual categories may often be absent. The visual categories may offer more examples and opportunities for students to see the necessity of metadiscourse and its influence and involvement in documents.

The factors of human relationship, author involvement, and choice offered by metadiscourse helps pull technical communication away from earlier expectations of objectivity and authorial detachment from the document. Metadiscourse emphasizes the rhetoric of technical writing, where writers draw on rhetorical strategies from many areas to create knowledge and understanding for readers whose needs and expectations in discourse are never static.

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**Computers and Composition**
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**Digital Literacy and Rhetoric, Computers, and Composition**

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As the World Wide Web, graphics software, presentation software, and multimedia authoring packages have become increasingly prevalent over the past five years, those of us involved in the computers and composition field have paid more and more attention to three activities: (1) incorporating images and design elements into our instructional presentations, (2) using graphics and design elements to enhance the rhetorical elements of our writing, and (3) presenting ideas and concepts dealing with visual rhetoric and visual literacy to our students in our composition and rhetoric classes.

Visual rhetoric is not a new topic—it has been touched on by previous composition/rhetoric scholars (for example, Jim Porter and Pat Sullivan, "Repetition and the Rhetoric of Visual Design," and Roy F. Fox, *Images in Language, Media, and Mind*, published by NCTE as part of its series on Public Doublespeak). However, our dialogue about visual rhetoric and about visual literacy needs to continue the work of these scholars. In addition, we need to advance our thinking regarding the ways visual rhetoric and visual literacy (1) impact the field of computers and composition and (2) address the explosion of technological forms that encourage and sometimes seem to demand the combination of text with graphics in rhetorical terms.

This special issue will address questions of visual rhetoric and literacy in their many applications (e.g., to pedagogy, professional writing, hypertext theory, and more). The study of visual rhetoric in this age of computers and the World Wide Web should be conducted by rhetoricians as much as it is now by artists, multimedia designers, and Web technologists. The essays included in this special issue of Computers and Composition foster such rhetorical study.

Contributors include Nancy Allen, Bran Benz, Christy Desmet, Michele Shauf, John Slatin, Geoff Sirc, Clay Spinuzzi, Pat Sullivan, Peg Syverson, Sean Williams, Anne Wysocki, Greg Wickliff, and Kathleen Blake Yancey.