Feels Good Man:
Memes as a Framework for Teaching Circulation, Remix, and Writing Transfer

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Abstract

This essay introduces a circulation analysis assignment, blending together insights from multimodal composition, remix/assemblage pedagogy, and circulation studies to encourage writing transfer. The assignment asks students to document the origins and evolution of a cultural meme (as coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins) as it is adapted for different rhetorical situations, modeled for students in the titular documentary film *Feels Good Man*. By completing this analysis, presenting it in multimodal contexts, and reflecting upon how they adapted that presentation for their audience, students begin to develop the metacognitive, cross-contextual thinking necessary for successful writing transfer.

Introduction

For nearly twenty years, writing studies has undertaken an agenda to identify the ways students adapt and apply prior writing knowledge to new contexts during and after their writing education—a phenomenon the discipline calls "writing transfer" (Anson, 2016; Bleakney et al., 2022; Yancey et al., 2019). In addition to documenting writing transfer, researchers are identifying mental processes that lead to it, including metacognition—a term writing studies has borrowed from psychology to denote a writer's awareness of *how and why* they are adapting their knowledge (Center for Engaged Learning, 2015; Driscoll et al., 2020; Lindenman, 2015; Nowacek, 2011; Yancey et al., 2014). These scholars argue metacognition is imperative for transfer because it allows students to recognize if, when, and how to adapt their writing knowledge to new contexts; in other words, metacognition develops students' cross-contextual awareness of rhetorical situations, helping them identify opportunities to recontextualize their writing knowledge to complete unfamiliar writing tasks.

Alongside these transfer researchers, a second contingent of writing studies scholars have been focused on the ways in which texts, language, and ideas move through culture and evolve over time, gathering under the umbrella of "circulation studies" (Edwards, 2017; Gries & Brooke, 2018; Porter, 2009; Edbauer, 2005; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). These scholars seek to understand how discourse evolves as it is adapted for new rhetorical contexts, such as the many mutations of the Obama *Hope* poster (Gries, 2013), paradigm shifts of the natural sciences (Kuhn, 1962), or the co-opting of Black Lives Matter rhetoric into texts supporting law enforcement ("Blue Lives") and firefighters ("Red Lives"). Given the cross-contextual focus of these areas of scholarship, blending pedagogical approaches of transfer and circulation presents an opportunity for students to simultaneously a) examine how writing shifts across contexts, b) adapt their writing across contexts themselves, and c) practice metacognitive reflection to facilitate cross-contextual thinking. While some have designed pedagogies emphasizing circulation through the lens of remix, and many transfer pedagogies engage in cross-contextual writing, there have been few efforts to explicitly blend the two.

The first-year writing assignment presented here represents such an effort, using students' familiar cultural register of memes to frame a rhetorical analysis asking them to trace the

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circulation of a cultural meme. The assignment expands students' prior knowledge of memes as online communication by (re)introducing the concept as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) defined it in *The Selfish Gene*: any unit of culture transmitted between individuals by imitation and evolving through mutation—such as words, narrative tropes, genres, melodies, trends in art and fashion, and online meme templates. By mapping the circulation of a meme, composing an infographic to deliver their analysis, and reflecting on the rhetorical decisions guiding their delivery, students develop their abilities to read across rhetorical contexts, adapt to rhetorical situations, and engage in the cross-contextual thinking necessary for transfer.

Inspiration and Influence

The current assignment is one of many similar tasks in writing studies known as a circulation analysis. At its core, a circulation analysis asks students to choose a unit of culture, document its rhetorical evolution, and rhetorically deliver those findings. Several scholars have previously presented such an assignment: from multimodal composition, Shipka's (2005, 2011) *Oxford English Dictionary* assignment tracing the etymology of a single word; from circulation studies, Ridolfo and Devoss's (2009) rhetorical velocity activity tracing the circulation of press releases; from visual rhetoric, Gries's (2013) method of iconographic tracking; and from remix/assemblage pedagogy, McElroy and Maynard's (2017) "genealogy" essay examining a "semantic unit" across individual texts (p. 107). While my version shares the core analytical task with its predecessors, it broadens the scope of analysis to include other units of culture and modalities of meaning making. While Dawkins' (1976) idea of the meme as a cultural unit has been criticized for its lack of discrete boundaries, in the writing classroom, the malleability of Dawkins' articulation allows for students to bring their own interests and literacies into the assignment, yielding a range of unique analyses.

Course Context and Assignment Overview

I teach this assignment at Elon University, a medium-sized private liberal arts university in the Southeast that is 60% female and a predominantly white institution on a residential campus. Like so many American students public or private, ours are conditioned to the standards of "good writing" upheld by decades of standardized tests: bibliographic research and formal prose presented in analytic essays, no matter the context or audience—hence my desire to expand students' rhetorical awareness to new contexts, research tasks, and genres.

At my institution, first-year writing is a one-semester course designed to meet five outcomes: engage with writing as a process, develop the ability to write across genres, understand how writing is socially situated, conduct research to develop arguments, and appreciate the capacity of writing to shape the world. My students complete three interconnected projects, the first of which is presented here and which allows them to begin refining their writing processes, develop their abilities in a new genre, and train their sense of the contextual nature of writing. When presenting this assignment to students, I break it down into three phases: research, delivery, and reflection.

Research

The research phase begins with students selecting a cultural meme. Given their digital literacies, many students research an online meme, with Doge, Crying Jordan, Distracted Boyfriend, and Spongebob being favorites. Each semester, some students will choose an analog cultural meme; over the years, these have included dance styles like clogging, fashion items like sunglasses, political iconography like Rosie the Riveter, the board game Clue, the "Yo Mama" joke format,

and historical retellings of fairytales like Cinderella. No matter the meme students select, I ask them to use Google, Wikipedia, and/or Knowyourmeme.com to research its history, identifying the following:

- Its origins and/or source materials, including literal or figurative predecessors
- The very first instance, including who created/first posted it, when it was created, and where it was first circulated
- At least three of its subsequent "generations," in which the meme has been transformed to function in a new context

Students then analyze each generation to discern its intended purpose and audience, how it transforms the original meme and/or previous generations, and how those transformations facilitate meeting the intended purpose and audience.

By conducting this research and analysis, students will ideally have a thorough understanding of their meme, its initial rhetorical function, and how the processes of imitation, mutation, and circulation have caused the meme to serve different purposes and connect with different audiences.

Delivery

Since this is students' first assignment in the class, I am directive in defining their rhetorical situation with three stipulations:

- Their audience is their peers, broadly conceived—first-year students, 18- and 19-year-olds, Gen Z, i.e., whatever framing helps them make sense of their audience;
- They design a visualization in Canva, whether that be a one-page infographic circulated online or a multi-page post/story for social media;
- The visualization should employ a custom, consistent visual theme that pertains to their subject matter.

These three stipulations are deliberate: since they are a member of the target audience, I encourage them to think about whether they would engage with the content they are creating as a heuristic for rhetorical effectiveness; given the prominence of social media content in their own lives, I ask them to transfer their previous experiences in consuming or designing visual texts; and the visual theme discourages the sometimes lazy use of templates and encourages them to think about the rhetorical relationship between form and content. However, the possibilities for delivery on this assignment are multitude, and instructors can customize the genres and audiences according to their own course outcomes.

Reflection

Finally, reflective essays accompany students' visualizations, asking them to articulate their rhetorical decision-making in six areas, citing specific examples from their artifacts as evidence of their thinking:

- Pertinence of their selected generations to an audience of their peers
- Organization and layout of the visualization
- Visual conventions of visualizations they employed
- Elements they used to build their visual theme, and how they relate to the subject matter
- Previous writing/design experience they drew upon
- Challenges or struggles they faced in completing the project

These areas of the reflection provide space for students to articulate their rhetorical thinking, verbalize their pathways of writing transfer into the course, and narrate their affective experience during the assignment.

Implementation in Context: Scaffolding and Supporting Materials

I typically allocate five to six weeks to this assignment; below, I document how I support three key phases of this project: research, delivery, and reflection.

Research: Weeks 1, 2, and 3

During our first meeting, we watch two videos from evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (Oxford Union, 2014) and philosopher Daniel Dennett (Big Think, 2017) introducing memes. In the former, Dawkins uses the game of Telephone to explain the processes of replication and mutation; to illustrate these processes, students play the game Telestrations, a blend of Telephone and Pictionary. Although memes are students' entry point to the course and frame this assignment, they are a stepping stone to introduce complementary concepts of remix and rhetorical situation; it is the triangulation of memes, remix, and rhetoric that allows students to conduct their analysis. The following class, we view Kirby Ferguson's (2010) webseries *Everything is a Remix*; like "meme," the term "remix" uses familiar vocabulary to describe the processes by which memes evolve in the realm of artistic creation. To complement Ferguson, we complete an intertextual mapping activity, where students choose a single text, identify three texts it took inspiration from, and one text each of those were inspired by, mapping out two generations of influence in a single text.

The second week layers in the vocabulary of rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1968) via Laura Bolin Carroll's "Backpacks vs. Briefcases (2010) an accessible primer for rhetorical analysis. With the concepts of memes, remix, and rhetoric in place, students screen *Feels Good Man* (2020), a documentary chronicling the journey of Pepe the Frog from comic book character to alt-right icon. The film highlights ten generations of Pepe and addresses the rhetorical dimensions of each, making it an ideal model of circulation analysis. Students complete an analysis of Pepe in small groups, selecting a generation of the meme and identifying its purpose and audience, how it mutates previous generations, and how those mutations contribute to its rhetorical effectiveness. Having facilitated this group circulation analysis of Pepe, I finally introduce the assignment sheet, explaining that the project asks students to do the same work as *Feels Good Man*.

Before conferences in week three, students complete a writing journal identifying memes they would like to explore, vocalizing questions they have about the assignment, and reflecting on their previous visual composing—a set of tasks which prompts them to think about how they might transfer those experiences into the classroom. During 15- to 20-minute conferences, conducted one-on-one or in small groups, I address students' questions, give them feedback and direction on their ideas, get them thinking about visual theme(s), and have them talk further about their previous composing to better determine their comfort with the task.

Delivery: Weeks 4 and 5

Week four supports students' visual design with an infographic workshop and peer review. For the infographic workshop, students gather five samples they would like to imitate in some way, such as layout features or visual style. The workshop begins with an overview of the features of infographics and components of a coherent visual theme. Then, after introducing the interface of Canva, I work from my own samples to model how I would replicate them in the platform and make decisions about color schemes, font styles, and other elements to build my visual theme. Students take the rest of the class to start imitating their own models, building their visual themes, and troubleshooting Canva. For the first draft, students must make progress on their visual theme and structure, and write the title, introduction, and one other chunk of text.

The peer review is guided by the chapter "13 Layout Sins" from *White Space is Not Your Enemy* (Golombisky & Hagen, 2010), which articulates common errors that first-time designers make; students then review partners' drafts for these errors and offer suggestions to improve.

In week five, students focus on the written content, making rhetorical decisions about how to adapt to their audience. This process begins with a guided rhetorical analysis activity. Students bring into class five to seven generations of their meme they might include in their final infographic. After reminding them of the analysis we did after *Feels Good Man*, we analyze a curated series of six sample remixes of Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* to identify their purposes, audiences, and transformations. I then model two ways of writing those findings—complete sentences or bullet points—and discuss the rhetorical benefits and drawbacks of both. Next, they write up an analysis of one of their examples—first as a paragraph, then as a set of bullets. To begin making rhetorical decisions about which generations to include on their infographics, we revisit my six samples to discuss which three would be most appropriate for different audiences: Millennials or Gen Z, men or women, etc. Finally, students return to their set of samples and make rhetorical decisions about the three they want to include in their next draft.

Reflection: Weeks 5 and/or 6

With full drafts of their infographics, students finally turn to the reflection essay. I introduce students to a what/how/why framework for reflection, explaining that for each reflection prompt, I want them to identify a rhetorical decision they made, i.e., *what* they did, *how* they accomplished that decision via specific examples from their artifacts, and *why* they felt this move was rhetorically effective. We then read a sample reflection together as a class, with students identifying when it employs the what/how/why framework.

Before students submit their final drafts, we have a second peer review focused on the infographic's written content and on the students' reflections, which helps ensure that infographics accurately describe the purposes, audiences, and transformations of their memes, and that the reflections address all prompts and invoke specific examples.

Successes and Shortcomings

Having taught this assignment for six semesters, I have noticed patterns in student approaches and responses to the project, offering evidence of short-term writing transfer and providing insight into how it might be tweaked in the future. Without having completed a longitudinal study of my students, it is nigh-impossible to discern whether they engage in long-term writing transfer after one semester with them. However, subsequent assignments in the course indicate that they engage in short-term transfer and begin developing the rhetorical awareness I hope to foster. Their second project is an annotated bibliography gathering scholarly sources connected to some aspect of their meme[1], and the final project is what Bearden (2022) calls a "remediation assignment," which asks students to re-contextualize their academic research for an audience of their choosing, in a genre appropriate for that audience. In completing that project, I encourage students to transfer their previous composing experience to guide their selection of genre and audience, as well as draw upon the research they gathered in the previous two assignments to help flesh out their rhetorical artifacts. Furthermore, in final reflection essays, students mention that their biggest takeaways from the course are an acute need for adapting to one's audience and the nature of writing as remix or re-use. In addition to these glimmers of transfer, there are other trends to mention.

Successes

- **Perspective**. Students express pleasant surprise at how Dawkins and Dennett expand their understanding of memes.
- **Agency**. Students appreciate the agency to bring their own interests into the classroom and choose their topics.
- **Engagement**. Students who really invest in the assignment seem to develop cross-contextual thinking, setting themselves up for future writing transfer.

Shortcomings

- **Incomplete Analysis**. Students often excel at identifying the purpose and audience of each generation or describing how each generation is remixed, but sometimes struggle to do both.
- **Path of Least Resistance**. Some students simply choose an online meme they believe will make the assignment easy.
- **The Utility of Infographics**. Some students express unfamiliarity with infographics because the genre doesn't circulate as frequently in the online forums they frequent; others default to using a design template despite my requiring a custom visual theme.
- **Misunderstood Reflection**. Rather than engaging with the metacognitive prompts, students default to summarizing the content of their infographics.

Possible Correctives

- **Analog Memes Only**. To discourage students' paths of least resistance, an instructor could require them to choose "analog" or "real life" cultural memes, in the Dawkins sense of the word.
- **Analysis Practice**. An instructor might conduct more in-class activities with students articulating the rhetorical and remix components of memes.
- **New Digital Deliverables**. The assignment could invite students to compose texts that circulate in the online spaces they frequently use, e.g., a series of TikTok videos.

The Meme-Cycle Continues: Possibilities for Future Mutation

Given the malleability of memes as a unit of analysis, many possibilities for this assignment could be adapted to other writing pedagogies. As mentioned above, the easiest adaptation would be shifting the genre of the deliverable; it could be retooled to a primarily textual genre or another multimodal manifestation. No matter the deliverable, the reflective element of the assignment must remain, as the reflection catalyzes students' rhetorical thinking. Further, depending on one's pedagogical approach, one might specify the type of meme students research. For public/civic writing, instructors could require students examine a meme shaping public discourse; WAC/WID students could map knowledge paradigms of their target fields, like the "turns" of rhetoric and writing studies, paradigm shifts of the sciences, or the evolution of research methodologies; and those working in Rhetorical Genre Studies can have students trace a genre, a single genre over several ecologies, or a single convention across genres.

Beyond adapting this assignment, there are also technological considerations in the wake of generative AI (GenAI). An earlier draft of this essay naively described the assignment as "AI-resistant"; given the technology's exponential growth in generating prose and interpreting images, students can now use the technology to complete and excel at the project. Recognizing "banning" GenAI as an exercise in futility, I have elected to integrate the technology into all stages of the composing process; I would rather teach students to use the technology ethically and transparently instead of incentivizing dishonesty with punitive measures.

AI can provide ideas for cultural memes to research, summaries of how memes have evolved, analysis of images, or initial drafts of text for students' visualizations. From there, it would be students' task to adapt that information to resonate with an audience of their peers. On the design side of things, York (2023) has employed GenAI as a design consultant, outlining genre conventions and brainstorming elements of their visual themes. It is also possible that AI could interpret students' infographic images to address the reflection essay prompts—a feature I will experiment with and adapt reflection prompts accordingly. Deploying AI in these ways will automate some of the text generation process but will ultimately allow the assignment to meet the outcomes of cross-contextual analysis, adaptation, and transfer.

These are just a few possibilities for the growth and evolution of this assignment. Given the continued need for students' metacognitive, cross-contextual thinking for writing transfer and the growing importance of understanding circulation as a driving force of rhetorical discourse, I hope that other instructors will take up this version of circulation analysis and make it their own.

ASSIGNMENT

Meme Research Infographic

As we have seen in our initial class discussions, human cultures emerge and develop through the repetition, transmission, and mutation of "memes." Furthermore, these memes grow and evolve through the processes of remix—copying, transforming, and combining memes in order to better fit within new rhetorical situations. This project will develop your understanding of these processes by conducting research into a meme of your choosing, learning about its rhetorical history, and presenting your findings to an audience of your peers.

Phase 1 - Research

You will select and research a cultural "meme" that interests you. You may select an online meme format/template (like Pepe the Frog), a single image/visual (Like the Obama Hope Poster), or you may choose a broader cultural meme that exists within and beyond digital spaces (Like "Keep Calm and…" posters). We will meet to discuss potential memes and finalize your topic during our first individual conference.

Once you have selected your topic, you will research the meme in order to identify:

- The meme's predecessors, origins, and/or first instance
- Three separate examples, or "generations," that adapt the meme to function within different rhetorical situations.

For each "generation" of your meme, you will conduct rhetorical analysis to identify:

- The examples' intended rhetorical purposes;
- Their intended audiences;
- How they transform, adapt, or change the "original" meme to meet that new rhetorical situation.

Phase 2 - Delivery

Next, you will present your research and analysis to an audience of your peers (late teens, first-year college students, Gen Z, etc.), creating an infographic or visualization in a free online platform called Canva. How you visualize and organize your research is up to you, but the visualization must have a consistent visual theme/aesthetic that relates to your meme or with your audience in some capacity.

Phase 3 - Reflection

Accompanying your infographic will be a 900-word reflection describing the rhetorical choices you made in designing your project. Use the questions below to compose your reflection, using specific examples from the project to illustrate your answers:

- How did you decide which generations of your meme to include? Why would those examples be relevant to your audience?
- Why did you organize the project the way you did? How does that organization help guide your reader through the project?
- What common features of infographics did you incorporate into your project? How do those features help engage your audience and/or help them understand your project?
- What specific elements (shapes, colors, images, fonts, etc.) did you incorporate into your project to build your visual theme? How do those elements contribute to the overall visual theme, and how do they connect to your topic and/or audience? What rhetorical effect does this visual theme have on your reader?
- How did our use of AI tools help you in brainstorming, writing, and designing this project? How did you have to adapt or revise the AI-generated outputs to better meet your rhetorical goals?
- What did the AI tools do well? What did they struggle with? Did you learn anything new about writing from using them?
- What other types of support did you seek out in completing this project? Feedback from friends or family? The Writing Center? How did you use those supports, and how did they help or hinder your success?
- Did you draw upon any previous writing/design experiences to help you complete this project? How did those previous experiences help you?
- Based on your experience completing this project, did you learn anything new about writing?

How We Will Use Generative AI

We will work with generative AI platforms at multiple stages of the writing process for this project. The functions we will experiment with include:

- *Brainstorming* – Getting ideas for topics and creating outlines;
- *Audience Analysis* – Developing strategies for communicating with the audience of your peers;
- *Design Consultant* – Seeking guidance for creating infographics, including organization, features, visuals, color schemes, and fonts;
- *Drafting* – Generating drafts of the infographic's written materials.

Unacceptable use of generative AI for this project includes:

- Submitting unedited or unrevised generative-AI outputs;
- Submitting an AI-generated infographic;
- Submitting an AI-generated reflection.

Using generative AI in these ways will be considered a violation of the university honor code.

Project Submission

You will submit two separate files in Moodle:

- Your Reflection in a Microsoft Word doc, Google doc, or PDF
- An image file, PDF, or URL of your infographic or visualization.

Assessment

In assessing your projects, I will be focusing on three areas: content, design, and the reflection. In terms of content, I will be looking to see that you have fully completed the research tasks outlined above. In terms of design, I will look to the overall theme and aesthetic of your artifact. Finally, I will assess the level of rhetorical awareness that your reflection indicates.

	Needs Improvement	**Good**	**Excellent**
Identifies origins/first instances of the meme			
Identifies three separate generations of the meme			
Unpacks rhetorical dimensions (purpose and audience) of each generation			
Addresses how each generation adapts/changes the original meme			
Adheres to a consistent aesthetic/visual theme related to the meme or audiences			
Employs logical and coherent organization			
Employs strong visual design			
Incorporates features common to infographics/visualizations			
Reflection addresses prompts and points to specific examples from infographic			

Project Timeline

- Introduce Project – Week 2
- Project Conference – Week 3
- Rough Draft – Week 4
- Complete Second Draft – Week 5
- Final Draft – Week 6

Notes

[1]For example, students researching the online meme Doge have done academic research on cryptocurrency, given the existence of Dogecoin.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.10.31719/pjaw.v9i1.208.

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