A Cabinet of Curiosities, a Dwelling Place
Weekly Writing on Instagram as Multimodal Praxis

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Abstract

This Instagram "Weekly Writing" assignment is a social-media-based, low-stakes, and longitudinal approach to teaching and experimenting with multimodal composition. Students create an account for the purposes of the class and follow each other. They post three times per week, sometimes freely and sometimes in response to a prompt or challenge. Together, we use the platform and its rich multimodal resources to consider how in-the-moment multimodal composing can spur invention, place the writer in the perpetual position of noticing, and create an archive of experience that holistically communicates beyond the author's original intention. This article discusses the pedagogical rationale for this approach, along with the issues to consider before adopting and adapting this practice.

I have long used a "weekly writing" assignment in my first-year writing (FYW) classes, since it provides students low-stakes exposure to the very thing that causes the most concern and anxiety: writing itself. As a genre, weekly writing assignments can range in approaches and goals: they can be free form, address a question or theme in the course, allow for practice of a particular skill, or act as a mode of research such as a researcher's notebook. They can be kept private between the student and the instructor, or they can be shared in community with the class. As long as the weekly writing assignment provides a relatively open and low-stakes place for students to *practice* writing, all variation in the approach comes down to the instructor's personal preferences, the institutional or departmental context of the course, and any additional goals the instructor might have.

In my most recent iteration of the weekly writing assignment, I chose Instagram as the central compositional tool in order to capture ephemeral moments in a writer's inventive and revision practices. Students make a new account for the class and follow their classmates and me. These course-specific accounts create a digital classroom with a smaller, networked ecology in the incomprehensibly expansive social media platform. Through their account, students keep a weekly log of classroom and personal experiences, posting three times per week. One post responds to a particular challenge or prompt related to course goals, and the other two are free for students to decide what they want to capture and share. To engage the multimodal aims of the assignment (and as is necessitated by the platform) each post includes a photo, video, image, poster, or other visual along with a caption that further articulates the exigence behind the post. In providing students with the opportunity to engage in low-stakes weekly writing, this approach also offers a place to actively practice multimodal writing. In what follows, I situate the bounds of multimodal composition, present ethical considerations in choosing this approach, detail two ways in which Instagram cultivates invention and ethos, and provide an outline of the basics of my particular version of this assignment.

The discussion of what "counts" as multimodal composition is complex. Given the brief nature of this essay, a comprehensive account of this discussion is not possible here, but the interested reader might consider Joddy Murray's (2009) *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect*

in Multimodal Composition; Jodi Shipka's (2011) *Toward a Composition Made Whole*; Jason Palmeri's (2012) *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*; Claire Lutkewitte's (2013) edited collection *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*; and Pegeen Reichert Powell's (2020) edited collection *Writing Changes: Alphabetic Text and Multimodal Composition*. These texts, among others, explicate multimodal approaches to teaching composition and complicate the boundaries of multimodal composition or multimodal pedagogy. Across these texts, two central themes emerge. First, that there really is no such thing as a monomodal text, since even a "traditional" essay presented as prose text on a page makes many compositional choices including paragraphing, negotiation of white space, and stylistic priorities, among others. Second is resisting the tendency to conflate multimodal with digital: while digital composition is certainly multimodal not all multimodal composition is necessarily digital (see Shipka, 2011). In this piece, I conceptualize multimodal composition as the layering of compositional choices a writer considers and negotiates in the development of a particular communicative goal. This version of the assignment centers on digital, multimodal composition, but could easily be transitioned into a non-digital, multimodal approach as well.

While social media offers a number of exciting tools and approaches, it also presents ethical issues I had to consider and address before and throughout the semester. Although it is a developing area within multimodal and digital rhetoric research, a few key pieces catalogue pedagogical experimentation with social media, including Instagram and other platforms (Buck, 2015; Coad, 2013; McNely, 2015; Shepherd, 2015). Familiarity with these studies made it easier to visualize what the practice looks like in the classroom, along with the risks/benefits matrix for any social media pedagogical approach. A major concern throughout scholarship on the uses of social media in the classroom is privacy and the potentially negative impacts of digital presence and data-mining (Daer & Potts, 2014; Faris, 2017; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Mina, 2017; Williams, 2017). To address these concerns, I conducted a privacy and presence assessment before committing to Instagram for pedagogical purposes. With Instagram, it is possible to create an account linked to a throw-away email, without your real name, and no other direct connections to personal identity. It is also possible to set a profile to private, so that only approved users can see your content. I also offered students an opportunity to opt out of the social media version of the assignment, and make their own multimodal weekly responses, whether digital or analog. There are many options here, and they are best negotiated with students on a case-by-case basis. In any case, informed consent is crucially important when asking students to engage in any digital spaces not already required by the institution.

The immediate benefit of this assignment is its inherent flexibility. What I present here is but one possible approach to integrating Instagram in the classroom; the practice can adapt and change for a particular institutional context or pedagogical approach. I implemented this assignment in my FYW courses at a large state school with a FYW writing program that serves over 7,000 students each year. Instagram offers a wide variety of compositional options within the platform itself, which can be expanded with free apps that augment Instagram content, such as Canva or Layout. Students can take photos, post captions, take video in creative forms (e.g., slow motion, boomerang, time-lapse), and use geotagging and hashtagging features to connect with other spaces and interests on Instagram. From their weekly writing work, students are able to bring their insights about multimodal compositional choices into their five major projects in the programmatic curriculum (Literacy Narrative; Cultural Object Essay; Disciplinary Literacies Project; The Remix Project; Learning Reflection). The weekly writing augments the programmatic curriculum and is worth 20% of their overall grade; regular assessments of their content are made. This grading approach matches the "persistence, not perfection" motto in my class and gives students confidence to experiment. Rather than teaching multimodality in a

couple of weeks, perhaps with the "Remix" assignment, multimodality becomes a continual point of discussion and practice throughout the course.

In addition to multimodality, I was curious about how this approach to weekly writing might help students to think about invention as an embedded part of a writer's orientation to the world. I wondered how the temporal and archival features of maintaining a social media account might create occasions for teaching invention. How might writing teachers expand opportunities for students to see how their orientations to the world are always, already the ways in which they come to ideas? Since we so often ask students to jump from proposals to outlines to drafts to final products in the span of a few weeks, we might inadvertently mask the inventive moments students have in relation to these processes.

A Cabinet of Curiosities: Invention and Collection

Other scholars have pondered similar questions regarding the uses of digital technology and composition. In *Technologies of Wonder: Rhetorical Practice in a Digital World,* Susan H. Delagrange (2011) connects ideas of visual argument and embodied composing through *Wunderkammern,* popularly translated as a "cabinet of curiosities" (p. 148). Precursors to modern museums, *Wunderkammern* presented objects from places near and far, in visual displays that both heighten the chaos of unrelated objects brought together and the underlying unity of such displays. Delagrange is careful to footnote the colonial origins of such a practice and is also right to suggest that with a new ethical relation to the world around us we might revise the practice of *Wunderkammern* in more generative ways. Jody Shipka (2017) has also played with the idea of *Wunderkammern*, in suggesting that perhaps one way to approach invention is to imagine writers as collectors (p. 143).

Instagram, viewed as a compact grid of image-forward content, reads as a modern day *Wunderkammern,* where the user collects and shares interesting, perplexing, moving, or just random slices of experienced life. The moment of posting is imagined as a connection to a particular audience (one's followers), but the aggregate builds an archive of different iterations of oneself across time and space. This kind of orientation is ideal for complicating, capturing, and critiquing modes of invention, as composers are able to trace moments of conceptual inspiration and growth.

At the middle and end of the semester (in connection with the final assignment—the Learning Reflection) I have students consider their growth, including personal, academic, social, and of course compositional. That is the strength of Instagram as a composing tool—it has the potential to aggregate a vast range of experiences in a concise grid, which primes the creator/viewer for inventional inspiration. Shipka (2017) believes that seeing the writer as a collector "also provides a point of entry for thinking about issues of care, cultivation, and responsiveness/responsibility, highlighting the affective dimensions of texts, objects, performances, and composing practices" (pp. 150-151). Certainly, in an age where we communicate less frequently in person and more through spaces physically distant and mediated by technology, finding ways to cultivate practices in those spaces that have an eye for care, responsiveness, and responsibility seems particularly urgent.

The Dwelling Place: Invention and Ethos

Using Instagram in this assignment also points toward my intention to build and sustain community and communication outside of the physical classroom. In this way, digital composing provides new avenues for theorizing and practicing ethos in composition. In his chapter in

Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres, Córdova (2013) builds on Michael Hyde's notion of ethos as a dwelling place, as presented in *The Ethos of Rhetoric.* This conceptualization of ethos moves away from the more common and reductive definition of "credibility" to ethos as a dwelling place, pointing toward the ways discourse is used to create spaces where "people can deliberate about and 'know together' (con-scientia) some matter of interest" (Hyde, 2004, as cited in Córdova, 2013, p. 147).

In their Instagram-based weekly writing, students dwell on their own account and in community with others. The first fifteen minutes of each class includes a centering discussion from one entry in our course text, *Read This If You Want To Be Instagram Famous* (2017), and a discussion of what content we have enjoyed from each other in response to the weekly prompts. In this way, students come back again and again, re-engaging with their own and classmates' content in new ways. They gather and generate ideas from viewing others' posts and from re-viewing their own. They absorb new approaches both to their inventive noticing and their compositional choices to share that noticing. I also set guidelines for interacting with others' posts, which include commenting on and liking posts as a confirmation of engagement. Like an agile discussion board, our classroom network expands the space/time of our connections beyond the classroom itself. These ongoing interactions foster connection and depth of understanding that interaction limited to the physical classroom might not have allowed, all while providing a centering practice that promoted a sense of coherence throughout the semester.

Some Specifics and Insights

In designing the assignment, I considered if I wanted to allow students to post freely or to provide some guidance or requirements for content development. I decided to set a specific challenge each week that students would respond to in at least one of their posts. These challenges connected to brainstorming for upcoming projects or isolated a particular multimodal compositional skill.

For example, in weeks 11 and 12, we experiment with time-lapse and slow-motion video. Here students consider what kinds of subjects work well for each, having to invert their thinking from capturing a slow-moving target over a few minutes to capturing a fast-moving target over a few seconds. This challenge focuses not only on considering the vast array of compositional tools available on the platform but also on matching those tools with subjects and concepts. I do not predetermine the weekly challenges for the entire course at the beginning of the semester. Rather, I articulate them a week or two in advance based on what was interesting from prior weeks, students' responses to course readings, and questions about work on their major assignments. I find value in this approach because the challenges often arise out of inventive moments in the classroom: students' questions, problems, or suggestions. This process mirrors the inventive potential of the weekly writing practice.

To ground and augment their multimodal experimentation, I assigned three short books, read in small segments over the course of the semester. First, *Read This If You Want To Be Instagram Famous,* edited by Henry Carroll (2017), was particularly helpful for isolating and exploring some of the compositional features on Instagram, as well as considering Instagram as a platform for one's own documentation *and* as a space to connect with others. We also read Roman Muradov's (2018) *On Doing Nothing: Finding Inspiration in Idleness* and Erik Kessels's (2016) *Failed It!: How to Turn Mistakes into Ideas and Other Advice for Successfully Screwing Up.* Kessels's book normalizes the experience of failure in creative and generative practice, which I hoped would help my students overcome their fears of experimentation. Muradov's text helps us think about invention from a radical perspective: rather than pushing or forcing ideas to come, sometimes we need to create

conditions of quiet and idleness for new ideas to emerge. All three books combine text and image in intentional ways, providing another opportunity to analyze compositional choices and apply those insights to their own weekly writing posts.

Overall, my students enjoy the Instagram approach to weekly writing. So far, no one has decided to opt out. In fact, most students have used Instagram before and felt comfortable with the platform. For those who had used it prior to the class, some shared that they appreciated having this second space to explore and experiment, since on their personal accounts they felt stronger pressure from peers to maintain a certain image. For those who had not, they enjoyed getting to learn a new platform, and some even continued posting content to their course accounts after the course ended. In the first week of posts of my first attempt at this assignment, we had a spontaneous, viral trend of pet photos after one student posted a picture of her dog because she missed him. This initial spark of community and collaboration strengthened my resolve to move forward with what felt like a risky, uncertain, vulnerable pedagogical experiment.

At the end of the semester, as we reflect on the assignment together, many students express gratitude for having this archive of their first or second semester in college and say that even if they do not continue to post on it, they will come back to the account to remember their classmates and the experiences they had throughout that semester. Of course, I was happy to see that their understanding of compositional choices had become more complex and nuanced, becoming more sophisticated and responsive to particular exigences. But the idea that they enjoyed the assignment enough to want to revisit their archive, their *Wunderkammern,* is what will keep me coming back to this practice for semesters to come.

ASSIGNMENT

Weekly Writing: Instagram

As a writing teacher, I have always used a "Weekly Writing" assignment as a way to encourage a regular writing practice and check in each week. It has taken many forms over the years, and I like to play around with it and try different approaches to see how it changes engagement with writing. The most common way I've done it in the past was to have students keep a journal document that was shared with me, and write 2-4 pages each week. Some of the writing was prompt-based and from class; some of the writing was totally open-ended -- up to each student to decide for themselves what they wanted to write about (and share with me!).

This semester, we're going to try this out on Instagram. We're using the book *Read This If You Want to Be Instagram Famous* to help us think about how to build a creative and engaged platform. We'll read a couple entries for each class and then try for one of our posts each week to practice one of the tips we've covered. Of course, our purposes are not to become famous on Instagram. I like the book for its design and content...and I'm less concerned with the parts of it about gaining a large following or monetizing your account. If that's something you're interested in (maybe you're thinking of going into business, marketing, etc.…) go for it! Just know that if all you have are the followers from our class, that's okay since our purpose is to think about how we compose in multimodal ways on a daily basis and how we can be more intentional, creative, and engaged in that process.

At the heart of it, the Weekly Writing assignment is meant to get you to CHECK IN to your life. This goes nicely with another one of our texts for the semester *On Doing Nothing* by Roman Muradov. All great writers do one thing really well, and really consistently...they NOTICE. They notice the things happening around them. They notice new details in familiar places. They

notice small interactions between people. They use all of this to continually craft their worldview and to think about how to communicate that worldview to their reader. This is true of creative writers, creative nonfiction writers, academic writers, and even professional writers.

Learning how to notice things in our lives helps us to slow down and to remember that to find anything, we first have to look for it. That's what I'm challenging you to do with this assignment.

The Broad Overview

1. **Create a new account** for this class specifically! I have a personal account and another for this class. You can decide to keep your account public or you can set it to private so you can decide who follows you.
2. **Follow your classmates**: You'll follow all of the people in our class and allow them to follow you.
3. **Post 3 times per week**: Some posts will be open, some posts will try to meet some challenge or speak to a theme that we discuss in class, and one post each week should actively attempt one of the principles we've discussed from the Angell book.
4. **Each post should have a caption.** This is a writing class, after all.
5. **Comment 3 times per week** on various classmates posts: Comment on people's posts, respond to comments on your posts, and generally start to form a community through communication. Try to spread the love! Comment on different accounts each week.
6. **Use our class hashtag on every post!** I want to create an archive of our work to be able to reference later in the semester, and this is a cool way to create a chorus of voices. We'll develop other hashtags throughout the semester, but make sure you use this one each time.

Some Rules

1. **This is for class.** *This is for class.* This is for class. If you already have an Instagram account, you'll probably interact differently on this account than you do on your personal one. This is a great skill to develop, as more of both our personal and professional lives occur on digital spaces these days.
2. **Direct messaging**: It is appropriate sometimes to send a direct message to someone instead of commenting publicly. Maybe you have a deep connection to something they've posted. Maybe you have a question. See if it belongs in the comments first because there is more likelihood to spark engagement on that post that way. So, while you are free to engage each other directly, you are not to harass, stalk, demean, hit on, or otherwise act uncool on people's posts or in their messages. ***If someone is making you uncomfortable, come to me and I will handle it with discreet care.***

Grading

This is worth 10 points per week (15 weeks, 150 points total, 15%). I will input those points on our learning management system each week. I will engage on your profile throughout the week as well; this will be my primary mode of feedback. If you are falling behind or not meeting the assignment, I'll let you know. Otherwise, you can just watch the points roll in each week.

Weekly Challenges

Week 1

What is writing? How do you feel about it? What do you hope to learn in this class? What do you think you will learn? Pair these musings with a photo that you feel represents writing.

Week 2

What is your favorite place to study on campus? Take a picture, geotag it if possible, and describe what you like about that space.

Week 3

Check out the YouTube Channel The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows and if time permits, the TED Talk "Deciphering the Language of Emotion" from John Koenig who runs The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows.

Choose one of the Obscure Sorrows and make a post that somehow represents it. Link to the video of that sorrow in your comments. OR Make a word for your own obscure sorrow, define it, and make a post that represents it.

Week 4

The Dictionary of Obscure Joy—let's flip the script from last week. Do the same thing, but this time you'll need to create your own word for your own sense of "obscure joy" … and an image or other visual to go with it.

Week 5

This week you're going to take a trip to the art museum on campus. As you explore the museum, I want you to keep your "writing cap" on and try to think of some ways you might be able to link what you're seeing and experiencing to what we've been talking about and learning about writing. You might also think about how it connects to Muradov's ideas.

You'll need to take a picture (or video, boomerang, etc.) in the museum that serves as your post, and write a caption that connects with the ideas above and the picture. Use the geotag function to connect the location in your post. Use the class hashtag and any others that you think might work well for the post.

As is the case with all art and exhibition spaces, you want to walk with care through the space, which means to check in with yourself and be aware of your boundaries or anything that is causing discomfort. You should feel free to remove yourself from those spaces. You are in no way required to see everything in the museum for this challenge.

Week 6

Download the app "Layout." **Layout** allows you to put multiple images into one image, creating a photo collage.

For a layout to be effective and interesting it should have some kind of theme or purpose. For example, maybe you have a two-photo layout that compares you at the beginning of high school versus the beginning of college. Maybe you have a layout of multiple images of your best friend as a tribute to them. Maybe you do a 3x3 grid layout and choose your favorite photo from each of the last nine months. The possibilities and potentials are endless…so get creative!

Include a story, description, quote, or something else that can help us to understand the purpose/theme of your layout beyond just the visuals.

For this week you're going to play around with the **Boomerang** effect. It is already in the Instagram app, you just open Instagram, bit the camera logo at the top left corner, and then it should be the first option to the right of "normal."

You can make your boomerang about whatever you'd like, but I do have a few photography/videography tips for making it the most viewer friendly possible:

1. **Hold the camera still,** and focus on the moving object. Because boomerangs are so short and speed up the video you capture, moving the camera can make it difficult to catch what it is you are filming and might make your viewer dizzy.
2. Choose something that becomes **more entertaining the more times you watch it**. We're looking for meaningful motion. The example I included, the little bear in my hot pot from lunch falls over as the server pours hot broth over him. This was a lucky mistake, because actually I took the boomerang later than I wanted to...but watching the water pour without the bear falling over probably wouldn't have been as interesting.
3. You're working with basically a 2-3 second loop. You want to look for **something that feels "complete"** even within that. This is the challenge and why finding a great boomerang is often hard...the moment has usually passed before you can get out the camera. Staged boomerangs are a good way to practice them to begin with!

Week 8: The Halfway Mark!

For this week's challenge, I want you to think about the first half of this semester:

How is it going? What's going well? What's not? What have you learned about yourself in the past eight weeks? How does it compare to last semester at this time? You are still in control of your efforts and outcomes? There is still time to change course—what might need changing? What's the reward you're working toward at the end of the semester? What's the light at the end of the tunnel? What and where is your motivation? Etc. etc. etc.

This is going to be a **CAPTION** heavy post. **Like a paragraph or more.** Try to take a picture this week to include in this post that marks this halfway point, but you can also use things from your archives.

Think about apps and tools we've discussed so far in class

• Layout: Might help you to bring multiple, disparate moments from this semester together
• Canva: Might help you to connect a mantra or thematic quote to an image that speaks to the semester
• Boomerang: Might help you to communicate the often-repetitive nature of academic life...forward, back, forward, back again.
• Creating new words: Maybe you have a new word to add to your dictionaries of sorrows and joys
• Etc. etc.

Week 9

No specific challenge this week—just be sure to make three posts about whatever you'd like by Friday.

No specific challenge this week—just be sure to make three posts about whatever you'd like by Friday.

Week 11: TimeLapse!!

As I shared in a post last week, I've been getting really into time lapse these past couple of weeks. There are a few reasons for this for me.

1. It is a way for me to have to leave my phone alone for a length of time. I've really been getting distracted by my phone as I procrastinate on things I need to do, so it's nice to leave it recording somewhere knowing there will be this cool video at the end.
2. It's spring! Which means we've been seeing more of the sun, less grey skies. My apartment has a beautiful view of the sunrise in the morning, so I've been taking advantage of that and sharing it with others.
3. This is the time in the semester that it just feel like things are flying by. Weeks are passing faster than I can keep up with them and all of my end of semester deadlines are suddenly looming. The speed of a timelapse mirrors this feeling, while also reminding me that the speed of nature is much slower and that I might be able to harness some of that steadiness in my own work.

This is what it looks like to reflect on your compositional choices, particularly in multimodal composing. Keep this explanation in mind when you get to the reflection portion of our next paper.

Anyway, all that said—I want us to experiment with **Time Lapse** this week. This could also be a good time to experiment with Stories, because stories let you add cool media (like music!) to your time lapses which helps to further communicate the mood of the video.

So, you can post to your feed or to your story—but if you post to your story please be sure to HIGHLIGHT your story so it saves on your page (otherwise, stories disappear after 24 hours).

You can use your camera (iPhones have a timelapse mode in the camera itself) or you can use the FREE app **Hyperlapse**...which is definitely what you want to use if you are taking timelapse where you are also in motion because it has an algorithm that stabilizes the image. I'll show you some examples in class.

Week 12

Okay now let's do it in reverse! SLOWMO

Slowmo recording has the opposite compositional logic from timelapse. A 5 second video in timelapse would basically be a photo, whereas a 5 second slowmo video would seem to go on forever. You have to find something that gains interest by being slowed way way way down. Usually, it's about the details!

Like last week, you can post it to your story (but be sure to add it to a HIGHLIGHT so it doesn't disappear) or you can post it to your feed. I know iPhones have a slowmo as a function in the camera, but we'll play around with android together in class!

Week 13

It's Spring! Let's celebrate that things are turning green! SO all THREE of your posts this week should focus on the theme "green."

No specific challenge this week—just be sure to make three posts about whatever you'd like by Friday.

Week 15

For this final week, I want you to make one of your posts a "preview" for your final paper. Take or find a pictures/video that represents your lesson learned and then write a brief caption (but that has enough context for it to make sense to a reader) that connects to your paper idea.

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.v5i2.78.

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