

Using GIFs to Position Students as Scholars

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Abstract

Article analysis assignments are common in First Year Writing. This paper argues that animated GIFs are an effective bridge between informal and formal literacies and encourage students to engage in the more critical elements of the genre. This article helps instructors to incorporate low-tech and low stakes multimodal elements into their assignment cycles.

Introduction

Article analysis papers, routinely taught in first-year writing (FYW) programs, are a challenging genre that asks students to move beyond summary, to break an article into pieces in order to analyze how the parts fit together, and to see themselves as scholars who can evaluate a published work. I argue that incorporating GIFs into an analysis can help students use their reactions to a text as a starting point for parsing an article, helping them to focus on how the article itself works as an informative or persuasive rhetorical piece. Incorporating multimodal elements into their papers, students have an avenue to identify and express personal reactions, which are often discouraged in students' previous writing experiences. Many of my students come to college having been told they should never use "I" in academic papers.

I teach this assignment in a FYW course at a small private college located between two large Southern cities. Our campus attracts students with a wide range of academic preparation, mostly from the local region. Few of my students (only 10-20% of the class) have read an academic article before starting college. In our department, FYW traditionally focuses on research and writing skills. Students take a course that targets argumentation in their sophomore year. In my FYW course, all assignments are scaffolded, culminating into a research review on a topic in writing studies.

In my course, I teach the article analysis early in the semester, after an assignment that asks students to find an academic journal article in the library. The assignment aims to familiarize students with the genre and increase their academic literacy. For the article analysis, students find an academic article on a chosen research topic and develop a multimodal text that explores how academic articles are built. The article also serves as a source for the research reviews¹ they will complete as their major class project. For their article analyses, students produce a 1000-1500-word analysis that summarizes the article, analyzes it as a piece of writing outside of content, evaluates the efficacy and legitimacy of the article, and analyzes their own research and reading practices. Finally, students must include 5-10 GIFs, one of which they make themselves. While the analysis assignment is not new to writing studies, including GIFs into the assignment adds an important layer to this traditional assignment because they bridge informal and formal literacies. In forums, personal text messages, and group chats, individuals are expected to respond thoughtfully in conversation. By using reaction GIFs, also commonly used in online conversation, this assignment asks for similar levels of thoughtful engagement with academic texts.

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The need for multimodal writing in FYW

Multimodal composing has enjoyed a moment (Khadka & Lee, 2019, p. 3), though some professors still debate incorporating multimodal work into their writing classrooms (p. 4). Composition teachers arguing for the incorporation of visuals and sound into the writing classroom predates the internet. As Palmeri (2012) argues, “Composition has always already been a field that has sought to help students draw connections between writing, image making, speaking, and listening” (p. 10). Ellis (2013) adds that multimodal writing can happen within traditional genres and can work as a bridge between academic literacies and the more everyday literacies of our students.

My own experience teaching at a small residential college suggests that making tiny changes to seemingly traditional assignments can be more successful in getting student investment than completely “born digital” creative assignments. For instance, students have preferred adding GIFs to an article analysis more than they have enjoyed video literacy narratives or infographic reflection assignments. In part, my FYW students have not been exposed to multimodal writing and have more limited views on what writing is. Multimodal assignments that allow students to archive and share the experience of writing can work to both help students better understand academic research and evaluate their own practices in ways that are easy to return to. For instance, when my students make learning portfolios at the end of the semester, they return to these artifacts and can see GIFs focused on their reactions and understandings of academic writing from early in the semester. Finally, they add an element of fun to an otherwise niche genre that analyzes another niche genre, both of which are relatively foreign to those outside of academia.

GIFs as cultural and educational texts

GIFs are a unique image file format in that they have essentially grown with the internet. Created in 1987, GIFs are by no means a new technology. Aided by early HTML’s tag, where no such video tag existed, the Graphic Interchange Format (GIF) allowed creators and web designers to upload small files that would more quickly load on the personal computers of the early internet. The ability to create animated GIFs also allowed early internet users to add dynamic content to their first websites (Eppink, 2014). While GIFs saw a decrease in use in the mid-late 1990s (due to expanding image file types and intellectual property disputes), the GIF made a resurgence during the mid-2000s, when teenagers and young women used them to brand their Myspace pages using applications like Blingee. Because they remain easier to edit than video, they are a standard part of what Douglas (2014) describes as texts that privilege the kairotic moment and user participation over aesthetic beauty (p. 213). Today, GIFs, either the actual file type or any other short looping animation, are ubiquitous. One can find GIFs on Twitter, Tumblr, and even a limited library within Microsoft Outlook—hardly the cutting edge of internet culture.

GIFs have been used recently in a number of instructional settings both within and outside of traditional educational spaces. Giphy, a large GIF hosting site, has multiple channels where GIFs serve as sign language flash cards (Sign With Robert is an excellent example). Math Warehouse (mathwarehouse.com) uses GIFs to show a number of mathematical principles. Additionally, academic libraries often use GIFs for instructional reasons because students are less likely to click on videos (Aleman & Porter, 2016). However, GIF use can extend beyond instructional purposes. GIFs have a strong affective quality, and their looping nature increases memory and retention (Ash, 2015). They are useful in exploring our reactions to texts and help us to remember key pieces, essential to writing that might take place over weeks.

GIFs are a durable file format that is easy to both create and manipulate. The format has

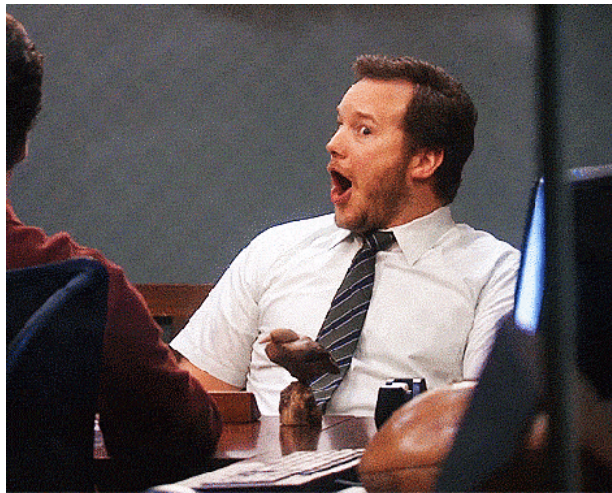


Figure 1. Parks and Recreation [GIF] (2015). This GIF shows Chris Pratt as Andy Dwyer on *Parks and Recreation*. Pratt looks excited as the camera zooms towards his face.

lived many lives and taken on many roles within internet culture. At present, one of the most popular genres of animated GIF is the reaction GIF. Reaction GIFs typically contain expressive faces, and individuals use them to represent their own emotional reaction to news or opinions shared online. Appropriate places to use them are social media posts, forum threads, and private online chats. As an example of this usage, instead of saying that a piece of information was delightfully surprising, a responder could simply share a popular reaction GIF of Chris Pratt from the show *Parks and Recreation*, a still of which is shown in Figure 1.²

Reaction GIFs work well to emotionally engage readers with the document itself. They intentionally stand “as proxy for, or expression of, emotion and/or affect” (Miltner & Highfield, 2017, p. 5). They afford writers opportunities to react, reflect, and dialogue alongside text. Tolins and Samermit (2016) call reaction GIFs an “embodied enactment” that make “embodied resources available to the texters to create meaning in a way that was previously limited” (p. 87). “Limited” here includes both text and emoji. Emojis are tightly controlled by the platform used for communication and tend to be conservative in what can be expressed (Miltner, 2018). GIFs are imported from a number of platforms and can represent a wider range of reactions. Students can even make GIFs of themselves.

These visual responses allow students the opportunity to play within the article analysis paper, a genre for a very limited audience (where they are the primary audience, and the professor is a secondary one). Finally, GIFs are their own kind of language, one many students are more comfortable with than academic writing. While not all students are used to creating GIFs, with even a casual perusal of the internet they are familiar with GIF literacy, or the ability “to use them appropriately in fitting contexts such as reactions, appropriation, humor, or commentary” (Gürsimsek, 2016, p. 330).

From student to scholar

GIFs are one way to make analysis feel less formal, and they provide students another way to conceptualize their reactions to a text. Beyond my course, I want my students to see themselves as scholars able to engage with and build on the research they encounter. To do this, they should learn to trust their intuitions and observations about research. Bloom’s Taxonomy ranks analysis and evaluation are some of the highest levels of cognitive work we can ask of students (Anderson et al., 2001). One traditional approach to helping students work through highly cognitive work

utilizes metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discuss the ways that individuals develop mostly spatial metaphors for abstract ideas (e.g., good is up) and create patterns of thinking. We adapt these patterns to our real-world experiences as learning strategies (p. 206). However, metaphor is not only a linguistic technique; visuals allow students the opportunity to represent their responses and observations about complete texts. Later thinkers (e.g., Forceville, 2009) have argued that Lakoff and Johnson’s work on metaphors needs to be looked at multimodally, in that we should not limit our understanding of the world to merely textual or verbal metaphors.

Students can use visuals like GIFs as language to create their own conceptualizations of texts. Most GIFs are pulled from popular media, and students are familiar with their context. In discussing GIFs as educational tools, Madden (2018) argues for uses and gratifications theory (McGuire, 1974) or using what we gain psychologically from mass media to “provide individuals with labels and interpretations for ephemeral emotional states” (p. 14). Essentially, individuals connect their current observations with previous experiences of watching and identifying with either the original text or, in our case, the GIF. They then use that connection to articulate their reactions to a text before they might be able to do so in written form. GIFs like the Chris Pratt GIF help us to hold onto that initial reaction as we move into a more thorough analysis. In their reflections on this assignment, students have commented that the GIFs helped them to organize their own thoughts around their reactions. They were privileging their individual insights, which they found to be important because I asked to see them. They also felt the GIFs stopped them from overthinking the assignment and injected a degree of fun.

Helping students position themselves as researchers with valid reactions to others’ writing helps students engage with academic writing. I want students to see that they are not simply reporting information, but also entering a conversation. Often teachers ask students to produce something that will satisfy them as readers and graders. Students’ relationships to their writing processes are traditionally hidden from the documents they produce, even though that process is exactly what educators are often trying to assess.

Teaching this Assignment

A strong analysis should be able to take apart a text, look at the pieces, and discuss what they do for the article and the larger conversation the article is a part of. Summarizing and analyzing texts is a core outcome for many FYW courses, but the genre differs a great deal from the argumentative writing required on primary school state tests in the United States. Because these activities are foreign and complex, I break this assignment up over several weeks into the act of reading, researching, and writing/designing.

Prework: Writing as a conversation

Students need to see their work as entering into a conversation. Such an idea is novel to many students. I introduce it on the first day and have them write “writing is a conversation” at the top of their notes on syllabus day. Additionally, on the day the analysis is introduced, we read and discuss Burke’s (1974) “Unending Conversation” metaphor (pp. 110-111). Because most of my students have never heard of a parlor, I encourage them to replace parlor with a house party.

Week 1: Reading

On the day I assign the article analysis, we discuss how to read academic articles strategically. In the first week of this assignment, we go over multiple reading strategies. We discuss annotating texts, but I stress the SQ3R (Skim, Question, Read, Respond, Review) method (Robinson, 1970) that has them read the article multiple times with increasing degrees of attention. Of note, the assignment states that they will only read the article once, but this is a deception as they end

up reading it three times if following the SQ3R method. By being able to anticipate what the text will be about, they are better able to pay attention to patterns and meaning in the article. In class, we read Skylar et al.'s (2002) "Teaching Communication and Professionalism through Writing and Humanities" in class because it is on a possible topic for the future research report and is just long enough to be read in a class period with the lecture.

Week 2: Research

We spend two days in the library. On the first day, a reference librarian teaches students how to use our databases and the affordances of different resources. They get a tour of the library and practice finding specific books. On the second day, I provide a self-guided activity that asks them to find a book on their topic in our library, find the book's bibliography, and then find a journal article from that bibliography in our school databases. In doing this, I am modeling how to identify scholarly articles and books (versus textbooks or popular books on the topic). At the end, they should have two options for their analysis.

Week 3: Writing

On the first day of the week, students do in-class writing assignments. We also break down paragraphs to show how academics, critics, and journalists capture conversations in writing, focusing specifically on where these writers begin to insert their own ideas into the conversation they have developed. Because the assignment asks them to make a GIF of their own, I also show them how to make GIFs in RecordIt, and Giphy Maker.

Rest of the semester: Building

Assignments in this class are scaffolded. Students use this article to develop research questions they use to interview an individual in the field or profession they hope to enter. They use this article, the interview, and other primary and secondary sources to create a research review of writing in their potential future profession.

What students produce

Generally, students produce strong analysis papers that break down how the article was written and the tools that the writer used to construct the argument. They do particularly well at citing specific examples when evaluating the rhetorical efficacy of the text. They also share a lot of GIFs, and this section offers some examples of how students use GIFs to build their papers.

Some students use GIFs to reinforce the content of the article. When the topic is business writing, students share Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* on a never-ending walk to his office. Nursing majors show me nurses from *Grey's Anatomy* endlessly giving each other knowing side eyes. One student used an article with a detailed description of how to set up a meta-analysis on smoking. They included a perfect loop GIF (a GIF where the beginning and end are indistinguishable) of a cartoon rooster chain smoking. These GIFs connect these articles on writing in a discipline with pop culture representations of those same fields of study. They do a lot of work to bridge the way the work of a profession is portrayed and what it might look on a daily basis.

Some students use GIFs to punctuate their reactions to the content they are analyzing. I share this example from Madison Bumgarner (2019). This sample is shared with her permission and the request that I use her full name. Bumgarner analyzed an article focused on teaching writing to accounting majors. In this paragraph, she analyzes how the organization of the article aids in her reading of this new genre:



The authors of this article put the information in a specific order that was very organized to get the information across in a logical way. By using headings and over ten different sources, it allowed the reader to understand the point they were trying to make - that being an accountant requires the knowledge of reading and writing well. They used headings to separate the different types of information, such as why the course is important, what the course consists of and how the students in the course reacted. These help the reader find information quickly and efficiently when looking back at the article. Without the headings, it would be difficult to read and keep interest because it would be one large paragraph. The article also included quotes from multiple sources that supported the reasoning behind creating the course. The quotes proved that the authors conducted adequate research prior to publishing the article, making it a valid source of information. This type of information can be helpful to others because it allows any reader to have a better understanding of how writing is incorporated in the accounting field.

Bumgarner identifies three elements of organization that she would like to analyze based on her correct assumption that this article should be readable for an unfamiliar audience (accountancy instructors learning to teach writing). In that, she identifies ways that the organization meets that purpose: clearly defined content sections that build logically and well-placed source integration that helps the reader build their own knowledge along with the article. She has added to this paragraph a GIF of comedian Kathy Griffin standing in her own closet for an *MTV Cribs* episode saying “I love organization” (Kathy Griffin Neat Freak [GIF], 2019). While the text itself is already complimentary in its analysis, the reaction GIF further highlights this. Likewise, as the GIF stands in for her reaction to the article she’s analyzing, we see her identification as an organized person helps her to identify with these elements of writing an effective academic article.

Some students share GIFs of their process. I had one student struggling to find an acceptable article on writing in a specific medical field. When they found one that looked hopeful, the link to the article glitched. The URL was so long that the student’s Internet browser could not redirect. Many scholars have had similar “I kid you not” experiences while researching. This student was able to record an animated GIF of the link malfunction and include it in the paper, to both of our delights. The GIF allowed the student to reflect on this frustration visually when it may have felt less appropriate textually. When he brought his analysis to peer review, half the class gathered around to watch, experiencing his own research process through the GIF.

Some students share GIFs of themselves. In one submission, a student calmly presses her forefinger to her lips in the universal request for silence. Her roommate, also a student of mine, enthusiastically jumps on a bed behind her. These two have quite different views on how to use a common living and study space. Students submit GIFs of them dancing in study halls with their athletic teams, pretending to sleep in the library, taking selfies with their siblings, and raising fists of victory at completing the assignment. They are literally inserting themselves into the conversation as best they can.

Finally, some students share a GIF of the character Kermit the Frog frantically typing behind the scenes of *The Muppet Show*, as shown in Figure 2. While I do occasionally see another GIF

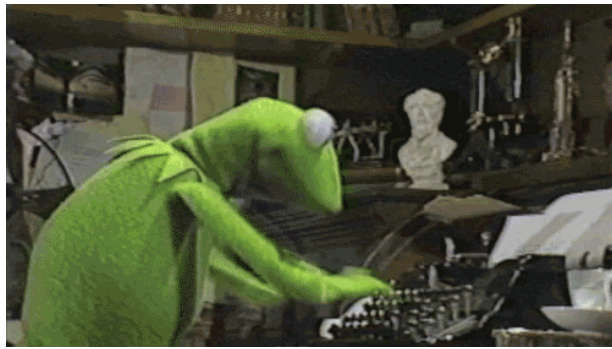


Figure 2. Kermit the Frog reaction [GIF] (2020). Kermit the Frog Reaction GIF. Kermit the Frog, a character on *The Muppet Show* frantically types off stage on an old typewriter.

specifically on writing, this one is their favorite.

Conclusions

I have just finished my sixth year of teaching this assignment. In that time, I have found it to be very effective in helping students to understand the structure of an academic article and the importance of their own reactions to ideas. Students likewise quickly learn the value of finding a good source that contains a great deal to discuss and analyze over something that can be easily read and quickly quoted. It works as a great introduction to academic conversation, and I have found that students who complete their article analysis tend to engage with their other sources more deeply—though often not as deeply as they do this article.

Students likewise seem to really enjoy the assignment and comment positively on it in their course opinion surveys, despite a number of articles coming out in the past few years commenting on how GIFs are no longer cool. Using GIFs in an otherwise more formal paper feels somewhat transgressive and works well to help students to open up more about their reactions to the reading of complicated texts. There are two key limitations to this assignment. The first is that a visually impaired student would find it challenging, but the assignment can be easily modified in a number of ways to replace GIFs with sound. Stedman (2013) would be a place to start thinking through using sound for similar outcomes. Additionally, some students find the transition from a somewhat informal piece to more formal work later in the semester a challenge. When moving to more traditional genres at the end of the semester, it is important to be very clear about genre expectations. Generally, however, this assignment is an effective option for encouraging students to break down a new and relatively complex genre of academic writing.

ASSIGNMENT

Article Analysis

Worth 100 points (10%)

Due:

Submit a shareable link to a Google Doc via Blackboard



Figure 3. Shia Labeouf magic [GIF] (2013). In this figure, actor Shia Labeouf appears in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch wearing a unicorn shirt. He wiggles his fingers and mouths “Magic” as the words appear in a glittery font across the bottom of the image.

Objectives

- Use basic rhetorical concepts – audience, **purpose**, genre, **style**, **occasion or exigency** – as **reading and writing tools**;
- Summarize and analyze individual texts;
- Evaluate information found using bibliographic tools.

Role

Research is key for understanding ideas that are either not your own or come from a place of experience. Research catches us up on conversations that have been going on for years before we entered them. Reading academic articles, however, can be a real challenge if you don’t have a lot of practice and/or aren’t engaged with the content. Getting the most out of a single reading will save you time and open up the opportunity for more research.

Task

You are going to do an analysis of an academic article or book chapter (called article from here on out) for your final research report. This analysis will be a mixture of text and GIFs. GIF stands for Graphic Interchange Format, which allows for short moving pictures (not video) to be placed in a digital document or website. They look like what is shown in Figure 3.

To complete this assignment you must:

1. Find an academic article on the topic of writing in your future career or on the future of writing. **You can use the article you found in the library assignment.** This article should be from a peer-reviewed journal that you find through either the library databases or Google Scholar. Print the article out as you will want to take lots of notes.
2. Read the article using the SQ3R method, taking notes throughout. As you follow the reading process, note how you feel about each stage and mark the realizations you have as you go through.



Figure 4. Do you even GIF? [GIF] (2013). In this figure, two Pokémon lift weights. The words “DO YOU EVEN GIF?” appear at the top of the screen.

3. Write an analysis that is 1000-1500 words long and includes 5-10 GIFs that show your process of interpreting and engaging with this reading (Figure 4). **One GIF must be a GIF you make yourself.** You do not need to appear in your GIF. Be thoughtful about the placement of your GIFs.

Format

- *Establish background with an audience in mind.* Your reader has not read the article. What do they absolutely need to know? Provide a summary.
- *Explain how the text is organized.* Explain why the author put information in that order. Why they used headings. Why they used quotations and sources when they did. Explain how this information can be helpful to others.
- *Evaluate the piece.* Is it credible? How do you know? How useful could this piece be for your final project?
- *Evaluate your experience.* What worked for reading this piece? What helped you retain the most information? What should you do to better grasp academic articles in the future?
- *Explain takeaways.* In your conclusion, explain what you have learned from this assignment that will be useful for this class or future classes.

This paper should follow MLA as best you can. You should include MLA headings, page numbers, references to the article’s page numbers, and a Works Cited that lets me know where your GIFs came from.

Where to Find GIFs

[Giphy.com](https://giphy.com) is probably the fastest way to find GIFs. It’s a huge, easily searchable, archive of GIFs and has a whole tab just for reaction GIFs.

How to Insert GIFs into Google Docs

The GIF in Figure 5 shows how to insert a GIF into a Google Doc.

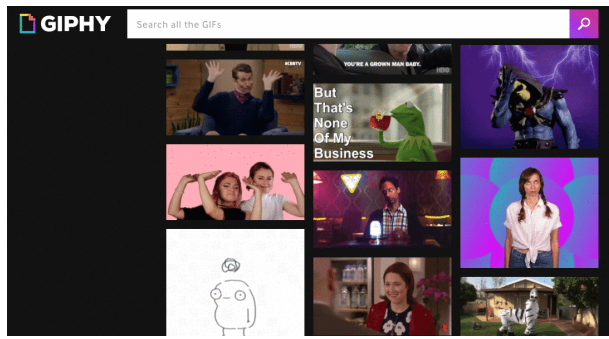


Figure 5. A tutorial GIF made by the instructor showing how to insert a GIF into a Google Doc.

How to make your own GIF

You can take video, upload it to YouTube, and then use Giphy's GIF Maker to upload it. For a GIF of myself, I use the Boomerang app on my phone. If you have an iPhone, Live pictures are one step away from being GIFs already. I used recordit.co to make the screencast GIF.

How to cite a GIF in MLA

Creator. "Title of Image." *Title of Website*. Date the GIF was published. URL. Accessed date.

"Parks and Recreation GIF." *Giphy*. 2015. <https://giphy.com/gifs/5VKbvrjxpVJCM>. Accessed 25 September 2019.

Notes

¹A research review synthesizes existing research on a topic. It is not argumentative and does not introduce new information.

²Because GIFs cannot be animated in a PDF (like this article file), the figures in this article show stills of the GIFs, but the references list provides links to the animated versions.

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.v7i1.94>.

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