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English 998: Multimodality, Multimedia, Digital Rhetoric

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**Multimodal Pedagogy & Multimodal Assessment: Aligning Process with Process**

New media, multimodality, and multimedia pedagogy has been acknowledged within composition studies as an attempt to better understand and better recognize “the complex ways that texts come to be” (p. 13). Though relatively young in terms of scholarship and theory – about ten years – multimodal compositionists are rethinking and reimagining (Shipka, 2011) the ways to compose in first and second year writing classrooms by calling for a move towards the digital, more specifically, towards the holistic process of composing. Multimodal pedagogy has been known to give students agency (Shipka, 2011) in the formation and process of their own texts, valuing the *process* of the composition instead of the “product,” which is the impetus of our field following the turn to writing-as-process in the 1970s (Murray, 1976), redefining the notions of the way(s) a text could come to be. Multimodal scholarship has challenged the traditional concepts by arguing that traditional frameworks can’t be easily applied nor should be overtly transferred to multimodal pedagogy (Lutkewitte, 2014).

Jody Shipka (2011) comments on composition’s commitment to move toward multimodal pedagogy: “If we are committed to expanding the technologies and representational systems that composition and rhetoric, as a discipline, work with, theorize, and explore, our frameworks must support us in making the shift” (p. 37). The traditional frameworks don’t have to be thrown out entirely, but they have to be (and should be) questioned. As pedagogy changes, as classroom techniques alter, as students come and go, so must our frameworks. Obviously pedagogies have shifted in terms of the different types of compositions accepted in the writing classroom (e.g. zines, websites, and digital literacy narratives). There’s no denying the flexibility that multimodal pedagogy affords. But, is multimodal pedagogy being limited by assessment – the traditional framework of assessment? Can we progress towards new pedagogies that attempt to push traditional frameworks when we’re not challenging the assessments that frame these classrooms? In this manuscript, I argue that, while we’ve been able to move away from some traditional frameworks through multimodal pedagogy, we haven’t been able to move away from others. For example, we haven’t (yet) been able to holistically move towards a different means of assessment.

The probability of the university holistically flipping the paradigm of assessment is preposterous. The university doesn’t have to change the assessment system: they’ve *always* used it and have done so successfully – producing and distributing letter-grades “works.” Look at the business model: they’ve cultivated a system that generates hundreds of millions of dollars every year. But, thankfully, composition studies is a whole different system with different theories, different beliefs, and different pedagogies. “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically,” writes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Composition studies has done exactly that: we’ve urged students to think critically about cultures, systems, structures, hierarchies, and writing. Composition scholarship has intensively focused on the role of the student writer (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1982), the significance of feedback (Sommers, 2006; Straub, 1996), an assortment of pedagogical lenses, genre as a social action (Miller, 1986; Devitt, 2004), and now, digital rhetoric and multimodality. In some ways, I’d argue that composition studies is always staring down the “traditional,” looking to complicate it, to find more complexities, to twist its nature, and to overcome it.

But have we been able to overcome our feelings – some of strong distaste and some indifferent – about assessment? Through multimodal pedagogy, I believe composition is at the edge of redefining assessment. It’s just not there (yet). In order to better understand this, first, I’m going to analyze what multimodal pedagogy affords the composition classroom in regards to student “choice” and how it cultivates one of our discipline’s main outcomes – process. Then, I’m going to offer the grading contract as a means of assessment that coincides with multimodal pedagogy; the grading contract, like the essence of multimodal pedagogy, can be seen as a way to expand and support our shift(s) away from traditional framework. I’ll conclude with practical application by illustrating how the grading contract works with a unit based on a multimodal pedagogical approach.

**The affordability of choice in multimodal pedagogy**

Claire Lutkewitte (2014) broadly defines multimodal composition as “communication using multiple modes that work purposely to create meaning…situated and thus shaped by context, history, audience, place, time, and other factors” (p. 2-3). Rhetorical awareness of how a genre functions and the purposes of that genre is foundational in understanding multimodal pedagogy because multimodal pedagogy attempts to bring to light the entire composing process. The composing process is complex in multimodal composition because of the combination of different elements. Claire Lauer (2014) writes that multimodal texts are “characterized by the mixed logics brought together through the combination of modes (such as images, text, color, etc.)” (p. 24). The formation of these texts, like all texts (even alphabetic), doesn’t happen linearly. Furthermore, according to Shipka (2011), students have to question their own role and what they bring to the genre and rhetorical situation in a multimodal classroom: “A composition made whole recognizes that…students may still be afforded the opportunities to consider how they are continually positioned in ways that require them to read, respond to, align with–in short, to negotiate—a streaming interplay of words, images, sounds, scents, and movements” (p. 21). Students are afforded the ability to play with logics and modes, and students are afforded a voice through multimodal pedagogy. Are students ever afforded to see how they’re positioned against assessment by the institution? Do we see how we’re positioned as deliverers of assessment by the institution? Multimodality allows voices to be heard about restructuring ideologies.

Lutkewitte writes, “Multimodal composition allows for many voices—even those new, marginalized, or unpopular voices—to be heard” (p. 5). A multimodal pedagogical approach attempts to embrace all student voices, even the marginalized, and desires for those voices to be projected. The multimodal approach resists the traditional framework that caters towards specific identities, particularly individuals who have geographical, socio-economical, and racial advantages in the American university. Multimodal pedagogy cultivates those marginalized voices and provides a platform for all students to be heard because the nature of the assignments complicate understanding and provides a space for flexibility. Flexibility allows students the affordance of approaching texts in their own way – their own language, their own style, their own backgrounds, etc. The emphasis on voice and flexibility provides student agency.

The traditional framework, which often limits student agency and supports a classroom hierarchy, is complicated through multimodal pedagogy because of its focus on deconstructing power structures. In a multimodal class, teachers and students work together to better understand digital rhetoric, visual analysis, modes, the formation of criteria, and the acceptance of failures. In a more traditional classroom, students are shamed when experiencing failure. The nature of the assignments in a multimodal classroom values the opportunity to fail, to take risks. Colleen A. Reilly and Anthony T. Atkins (n.d.) write, “Creating digital texts often requires that students learn new skills, which simultaneously requires that they take risks and experience failure” (<http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae/>). Digital texts and assignments allow students to choose, and their choices aren’t penalized as they attempt to participate in new genres with new conventions.

Multimodal pedagogy also affords students to think outside academia to a broader, extended audience. Geoffrey Sirc (2004) writes, “Life is long, college short; do we teach to life or college? I’m more and more persuaded to err on the side of life in my course: both the public, cultural lives students live, as well as their own personal lives and expressions” (p. 113). Sirc brings to light questions about the nature of our pedagogy and the purposes of our classrooms; he focuses on ideas I struggle with regularly– do I teach for academia or do I teach for the public? Both? Yes. I feel as though one of my roles as a composition teacher is to prepare students for cross disciplinary thinking and writing as well as culturally, critically engaged thinking. I believe a multimodal pedagogical approach cultivates both purposes quite well. The traditional classroom may ere towards a more academic audience and preparing students for more academic tasks. The multimodal classroom, once again due to the nature of the assignments, challenges the concept of space—inside vs. outside. Digital compositions (e.g. websites) are far more open and available to the public; anyone can explore what’s being composed online.

There seems to be plenty of affordances through a multimodal pedagogical approach. At the heart of multimodal pedagogy is the ability to challenge traditional frameworks. I applaud multimodal pedagogy for pushing the norms of traditional composition classrooms, but I question whether it has done enough (yet) in terms of resisting the traditional paradigm of assessment. There’s still the *reality* of evaluating and assessing student work regardless of the pedagogical approach we choose to utilize in the classroom. Overall, multimodal pedagogy (like composition studies) emphasizes and values process: thinking about thinking, writing about writing, composing, revising, analyzing conventions, critically thinking about constructions, etc. In what ways is multimodal pedagogy challenging the traditional frameworks of assessment? Multimodal scholarship has introduced what assessment looks like in quite a few multimodal classrooms. Is the assessment pushing the traditional? Or, is multimodal pedagogy continuing to operate under the traditional means of assessment, contradicting what the pedagogy affords?

**Multimodal composition assessment with the grading contract**

I want to acknowledge that multimodal scholars are attempting to reimagine assessment and recreate assessment that deviates from the norm. Shipka offers a *statement of goals and choices* (SOGC) as a way to embrace an element of process that slightly breaks away from the traditional means of assessment. The SOGC is a “highly detailed” statement that explains each text and the choices behind the process of composition. In *Toward a Composition Made Whole* (2011), Shipka references moves toward valuing process and the importance of making students aware of choices in multimodal pedagogy: “what is crucial is that students leave their courses exhibiting a more nuanced awareness of the various choices they make, or even fail to make, throughout the process of producing a text” (p. 85). This awareness allows students to discover meaning and make *choices* – something I noted as an affordance of multimodal pedagogy– and these choices allow students the ability to experience failure by taking risks – another affordance.

Shipka’s SOGC is similar to other constructions of a reflective text that composition scholars have implemented in their own classrooms (Dietrich; Faigley; Bishop; Elbow). She discusses the purpose: “to rigorously document products-in-relation-to-processes and to detail the various strategies…they employed in order to accomplish their goals and shape their audiences’ reception of their work” (p. 120). This is noble in that it cultivates student meta-awareness of the process (and their own process) of composing a text. But, the folly comes in the *assessment process*. The statement might not be traditional in the sense of a student forming a product and being assessed by that singular text, but the assessment of the statement is *still* working under the traditional framework for assessment: the statement functions as just another text being assessed as a product. The composition process is valued in the content of the statement, but not in the assessment process. Students can talk about their process and teachers can understand whether the students are meeting the goals in which they set forth as criteria. But, at the end of the day, it’s completely contradictory because the assessment itself – the very essence, the very nature – doesn’t value process. The traditional framework of assessment is product oriented, not process. Therefore, a new type of assessment must be enacted, especially in a multimodal classroom that emphasizes and values process.

*Enter:* the grading contract. I believe the grading contract, something that composition scholarship has acknowledged, pushes the bounds of the traditional framework of assessment that values product over process. The grading contract confronts the traditional limitations while simultaneously complementing other values of multimodal pedagogy: student choices, student agency, embracing failure, cultivating process through quantities of writings and drafts, creating awareness of decisions and genres, etc. Peter Elbow (2009), one of the fundamental composition theorists and a supporter of the grading contract, writes, “Contract grading focuses wholeheartedly on processes whereas conventional grading focuses much more on products, outcomes, or result” (p. 260). In what ways does traditional grading truly focus on process? Sure, students can produce multiple drafts and even write a rationale about their “process” and the “choices” they made, but what eventually happens under the traditional framework? Teachers perceive the quality of the product and assign a grade. If multimodal pedagogy wants to focus on the process of composing, it must first look at the assessment being produced and distributed.

The grading contract coincides with multimodal pedagogy in that it provides student agency and voice. The contract fully embraces flexibility and choice. Students are encouraged to take risks, try different styles and modes of composing to see what’s effective. Because students are encouraged to take risks with the grading contract, students are thinking about the composing process without having to worry about a grade. Elbow writes, “With contracts, the writing becomes what's at stake, not so much the grade. Students are more open to radical changes and are more inventive in how they might approach an essay, since they have a solid cushion of safety if the draft turns out to be a disaster” (p. 255). The grading contract has no hidden agendas: the teacher isn’t forming criteria or grading papers in a dark room. Students know what needs to be done in order to meet the requirements for a specific grade.

In order to work be effective teachers, we have to see how the traditional framework is aligning with or obstructing our pedagogical goals and values. In some pedagogies, maybe the traditional framework of assessment works best (although I’d question it if it were a course in composition studies). In some pedagogies, maybe the traditional framework is hindering what we want or desire. Multimodal pedagogy affords us a lot of opportunities to question the traditional paradigm and classroom structure. Likewise, I believe it affords us the ability to question the traditional means of assessment by asking: is traditional assessment aligning with the values of multimodal pedagogy? When looking at what multimodal pedagogy affords as well as what the grading contract affords, I believe the grading contract more effectively aligns with a multimodal classroom. I believe the grading contract, ultimately, compliments multimodal pedagogy.

**Digital literacy narrative and the grading contract at the University of Kansas**

The first-second year writing program at the University of Kansas is made up of *English 101: Composition* and *English 102: Critical Reading and Writing*. English 101 is constructed to meet three outcomes: (1) Analyze how language and rhetorical choices vary across texts and different institutional, historical, and/or public contexts, (2) Demonstrate their rhetorical flexibility within and beyond academic writing, and (3) Revise to improve their own writing (FSE handbook). Due to the nature of the course, instructors have flexibility in regards to what genres of composition they want to teach. In my English 101 course(s), students have composed zines, children’s books, eulogies, and mixtapes. I usually have students analyze album covers – focusing on the visual rhetoric of images – for one project as well. This semester (F2015), I designed a unit on multimodality and multimedia. I’ve always incorporated different technologies in the classroom, but I’ve never assigned a unit project solely based and assessed on the digital. I wanted to stretch my own pedagogical comforts by having students compose a digital literacy narrative.

My reasoning for this assignment is at least threefold: (1) extend knowledge on multimodality and embrace multimodal pedagogy, (2) cultivate an environment that explores the digital instead of the traditional alphabetic text, and (3) try to assess based on a framework that coincides – works with – the multimodal pedagogical approach. I’m interested in allowing students the opportunity to use a text in different places, not just for the purpose(s) of academia or English 101, and there’s a sense of “real world” application that comes from having students compose a digital literacy narrative. That’s not to override the outcomes of other unit projects. For example, an album cover analysis teaches critical thinking, questioning, visual rhetoric, modes of persuasion, layout choices, etc. which should transfer across disciplines and extend to their cultural perception. Those concepts have application to outside academia, but, this semester, I wanted to intentionally include an assignment that could literally transfer from my class to the culture regardless of discipline or field. Hence, the digital literacy narrative: a student could point a future employer to their digital literacy narrative more so than they could hand over an album cover analysis and it have some meaning or influence to that employer.

My digital literacy narrative assignment (see *Appendix*) focuses on “real world” application. As noted in the assignment, one of the biggest benefits of the digital literacy narrative would be to attach it to a future job application; most applications are done digitally and offer a space to provide a personal website domain. The digital literacy narrative offers a sense of materiality, not in the way we may assume “material” as something tangible in nature, but more so in regards to the relevance and significance the assignment has on projected applicability. The *Appendix* does a decent job explaining the rationale for the assignment, and I imagine students will be intrigued by its nature. Like my other projects, I think this one isn’t something they had in mind prior to coming to college, especially freshman English. More importantly, for program expectations, I think this assignment meets the required outcomes.

I’m going to first explore the rhetorical elements and genre conventions of personal websites. Through analyzing the genre as a class, I hope to provide familiarity with the nature of the assignment and what’s at stake. Other aspects will come from our original exploration: layout/design choices, accessibility, ease of navigation, image-text relationships, bios, CVs, etc. Hopefully, the class will see this as another space to compose and construct with meaning and purpose for a particular audience. The audience, for our purposes, will be a potential employer. By having this audience in mind, we’ll be able to see how web spaces are constructed differently depending on the rhetorical situation. Students will be able to see how digital rhetoric takes shape and, ultimately, how there are genres within genres in regards to digital domains. For example, students will be able to analyze how a Facebook post or tweet on Twitter looks strikingly different in nature and tone compared to what this particular assignment is having them do – create a professional tone for a future employer. The genre expectations are different because the rhetorical situation is different; understanding rhetorical flexibility is a theme in all my assignments for English 101.

For this project, I’m using the foundational bones of the grading contract to assess student work. I’m deciding to take the grading contract out of its normal position – a semester long agreement – to test how it can work for an individual assignment based on multimodal pedagogy. Usually, the grading contract takes form and is conducted through an entire semester (not just for one project). I want to incorporate the grading contract because (1) it aligns with the nature and value of multimodal pedagogy, and (2) it addresses certain fears: students won’t be afraid of “knowing where they stand” or knowing how my perception will affect their “grade”; students won’t be afraid to take risks; and teachers won’t have the fear of deciphering between what makes up a B or B minus letter-grade. Elbow (2009) writes, “Teachers tend to feel obliged, for example, to figure out their borderline between Β and Β minus. Contract grading eliminates this kind of agonizing” (p. 250). As composition instructors, ones who value process over product, grading can be intimidating. I know I struggle trying to pinpoint what constitutes a B as opposed to a B minus; I (personally) find it arbitrary, subjective, and awfully painful.

In the back of my mind, I’m wrestling with the probability of the B minus student spending twice as much time on the assignment as the B student. There I sit (in an all-too-familiar position), left with the role of dictator – judge – having to scratch a single letter-grade on a product while preaching process. And that’s just for a B to B minus. Elbow confesses that the grading contract may provide a student a B in his class whereas the same student might have “earned” a C in another teacher’s course. But, he counters with the notion that the grading contract considers missed classes, deadlines, peer-to-peer etc. An “excellent” writer may get a C according to the contract whereas a typically defined “weak” writer might get a B because of her diligence and effort to engage in the material, attend class, and contribute to discussion. This is one element of how the grading contract combats grade inflation: it disqualifies the student who writes “good enough” to “deserve” a high grade. Students must meet the terms of the contract which is much more complex than the perceived quality of the work.

Since I’m only using the grading contract for one unit, I’m obligated to only measuring *student labor* for one month, the typical time-frame of an English 101 unit. As I stated earlier, ideally, the grading contract would be used all semester. I use the term *student labor* as a representation of time (spent on the process) and quantity (amount of writing production). The two coincide and best reflect the most important part of our composition classrooms – process. The grading contract affords us the ability to value process, something the traditional framework doesn’t provide. The contract will be formed in class through a collaborative discussion, but, like most contractual agreements, I will bring to the table points that I have in mind that meet the expectations of the labor. As a class, we’ll negotiate the terms of agreement. This will be the starting terms (influenced by Elbow and previous grading contracts I’ve used):

You are guaranteed a B for this unit if you:

1. Attend class – not missing more than one class session
2. Meet all due dates of small writing assignments (5-7) – not missing any assignment or turning in any assignment late
3. Participate in in-class activities and larger group discussions – a part of this requirement will be assessed by your colleagues
4. Attend and provide feedback during peer-to-peer workshops and drafts – failure to attend workshop days results in at least a C
5. Make substantial revisions to drafts – you will include all your draft copies and your reasoning for making changes when you turn in your final project
6. Complete the due date for the unit assignment – meeting the expectations we formed in class

These six elements of student labor will guide what I’ve determined as “meeting the process” of this unit and the unit outcomes. Elbow writes, “The bottom line is that contract grading fosters a deep commitment to process…it’s the process that counts” (p. 261). Through my digital literacy narrative unit, students will be engaged in processes; we’ll be able to concentrate on the process *together*, without being divided by the hierarchies of power that traditional assessment creates. In some ways, the grading contract doesn’t deviate from what we already do in our classrooms through attendance policies and late work policies. These policies are, more or less, a contractual agreement with students based on their labor. In my unit, under these terms, if a student misses two classes (in a month), they won’t receive a B on the unit project. If a student turns in a small writing assignment late, they won’t receive a B on the unit project. Students have agency: they’re responsible for the amount of labor they want to produce, and they know the consequences for not producing that labor. The grading contract provides negotiation and allows students a voice in the assessment process The blurriest aspect of this contract may be #6 because it isn’t clearly defined what the expectations of the unit assignment are (yet). These expectations will be formed in class – together – and will consist of what students think meets the genre conventions (ones we’ve studied throughout the unit) of the assignment.

**Towards an assessment made whole through multimodal pedagogy**

Within my assignment (see *Appendix*), I offer guiding questions – much like Geoffrey Sirc’s (2004) box-logic activities – but I’m not assessing students purely based on this one piece of writing; this project *isn’t* the only thing students are being assessed on. In Sirc’s box-logic activities, he evaluates student work by measuring “process-traces” through a list of questions, noting that the questions guide the “criteria” for the assignment. I believe we have to question the nature of what he’s “grading”: he’s grading whether the criteria (criteria he’s possibly formed without the input of his students) is being met by his students. The evaluation of the text is based on Sirc’s perception of the criteria and how it corresponds with the student work. More or less, Sirc is focusing on the “product,” not the process, because the criteria functions under the traditional framework that emphasizes a singular text. Shipka runs into the same problem in her assessment even though her assignment is divvied into two different elements of evaluation: the SOGC and the project. Ultimately, Shipka is assigning a singular evaluation to the SOGC as well as the project which communicates product over process: the SOGC gets a letter-grade and the project gets a letter-grade. The grading contract exposes the failures in the traditional framework as well as enlightens the impetus of multimodal pedagogy: to teach and value process.

Through the use of the grading contract, the teacher isn’t assigning something to the product because the student already knows the grade – if they complete the work following the outlined criteria and do so in good faith, the student receives a B letter-grade. The grading contract is operating under the traditional framework in that grades have to be assigned in courses in academia, but is resisting the traditional notions that construct the framework: perception of the quality of the product. Since composition studies values the process of writing (which usually leads to a better quality of writing), the traditional grading framework doesn’t really afford our field with much, if anything, because the traditional framework is designed to emphasize product-like constructions (e.g. tests/quizzes).

In a multimodal pedagogical approach, the grading contract aligns process with process. Multimodality emphasizes the importance of the composing process by highlighting the significance of rhetorical situation(s), working within genres, complimenting or subverting expectations, and playing with creativity, style, and form. The traditional assessment framework doesn’t “reward” students who attempt to deviate from the norm. Through the grading contract, risk and failure are encouraged because it illustrates the process of composing: what works, what doesn’t work, etc. Elbow (2009) admits that “contracts don’t solve all our problems” (p. 261). But, what assessment method does? Does the traditional framework *solve* *our problems*? Until we begin pushing against the traditional – something multimodal pedagogy encourages us to do – we’ll never be able to see what other assessment options could be more effective and could align more closely with what we value in our composition classrooms.

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*Unit IV*

**Digital Literacy Narrative**

For our final unit, we’re going to explore digital literacy narratives, and you’re going to compose your own digital literacy narrative. The digital literacy narrative has transferable skills and application to the outside workforce, particularly when applying for a job. Many (to most) job applications are produced online and offer various means to represent a person’s identity and image. Besides the typical resume being mandatory in the application process, one optional category that applications offer is the chance to insert a personal domain or website. These domains can be seen as a marketing device of a person’s character, previous work history, contact information, creative portfolio, etc. These spaces allow you to showcase who you are.

As our culture continues to advance in technology and as we continue to engage in technology on a daily basis, composing a digital literacy will allow us to explore the composition process of creating a webspace. This unit builds on themes of previous units: analyzing situations, identifying audiences, evaluating layout/design/color schemes, etc. You will have the opportunity to choose from various templates and, in some way, make the space how you want it to be. First, we will explore the genre of the digital literacy narrative which will allow us to better understand its expectations before creating our own. The digital literacy narrative, ultimately, provides application – it allows us to use what we’ve learned over the course of the semester for something that will hopefully increase your marketability and knowledge of rhetoric.

Over the course of the semester, we’ve engaged in different genres that, to some, may not seem as applicable to your chosen career or major. While we’ve confronted that line of thinking by showing and arguing how ideas and techniques transfer from one genre to another, I acknowledge that some people evaluate success or lack thereof on some sense of materiality. Therefore, I see the digital literacy narrative as an applicable genre to all fields of study. I believe that the digital literacy narrative offers a material element to help you succeed in the future job market, and I think this unit, though shorter than the others, will be extremely valuable to you.

When composing your website, you may need to address such issues as:

* Who is the intended audience? Who will be accessing this site and why?
* What are the genre expectations and how have you met those expectations?
* How are you representing yourself? What do you want people to know?
* Is your site easily to navigate, clean, and professional?

For this project, we’re going to be using Weebly – a website domain space that allows you to personalize your own webspace. We’ll be exploring the site in class, but it’s important to note the timeframe for this project – about three weeks. You’ll have a bit of in-class time to compose your site, but the majority of the creation is going to be done outside of class. As you know, I value *student* *labor*, participation and completing work with good faith and on time. My expectations remain the same for this project.

**As I read your digital literacy narrative, I will consider the following questions:**

* Does the digital literacy narrative follow conventional genre expectations?
* What does it communicate to the intended audience?
* Is the digital literacy narrative easy to navigate, clean, and professional?
* Does the digital literacy narrative properly represent the individual?
* Does the digital literacy narrative include 3 pages and at least 500 words of text?

These questions should help guide you in understanding the expectations of the assignment. We will form a more in-depth expectation criteria together as a class, and we will negotiate what is and is not effective for this particular assignment.

**Deadlines:**

**Tuesday, December 15:** Unit IV project due by 11:59 a.m. (website link posted on Blackboard)