

THESIS

A FANDOM FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY IN FIRST-YEAR  
COMPOSITION CURRICULUM

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## ABSTRACT

### A FANDOM FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CURRICULUM

Critical digital media literacy is an important factor in everyday life and in academia, but it has failed to gain momentum in first-year writing studies as a necessary literacy for students to develop. A comparative analysis of two first-year composition programs and the inclusion of autoethnographic examples is done to explore how critical digital media literacy is valued in current curriculum and to showcase its potential. Findings indicate that, while critical digital literacy is, in fact, a major part of first-year composition curriculum, it is not overtly named as such. The power in naming the literacies composition instructors expect students to enact and learn should not be underestimated, and composition scholars must renegotiate how we teach students to navigate our increasingly digitally mediated world. An example of how a fandom framework might name and develop those literacies is offered.

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## DEDICATION

To Wilderado, who wrote “Rubble to Rubble” and gave me the words to make it through my master’s degree: may we all learn to walk by learning to stumble.

To my family, who encouraged me to shoot for the stars and made sure I got there.

*Ad astra per aspera*

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## INTRODUCTION

*“No, you do it this way!” I yelled at my friend and yanked the mouse away so hard it unplugged from the keyboard.*

*“Great, now look what you’ve done,” Sam replied with an eye roll.*

*“It’s not like it’s a hard problem to fix.”*

*“Oh yeah? Try it.”*

*I huffed and bent over to see the back of the keyboard. I didn’t know why Sam acted like this was difficult. All I had to do was put the cord in the hole. I peered closer and lined the shape up just right, except it wouldn’t go in.*

*I straightened up and glanced at Sam out of the corner of my eye. She had the most disgusting smug smile on her face. I wanted to throw up.*

*“Dad always has to come fix it when that happens because our hole isn’t shaped right,” Sam said with that stupid grin.*

*Ready to do anything to wipe the grin off her face, I said, “Doesn’t your dad get home from work at like 7:00?”*

*Immediately the problem was clear. There was no way we could continue playing computer games unless we managed to reconnect the mouse to the computer.*

*“I could call him?” Sam said warily.*

*“And do what? Have you ever reconnected it before?”*

*“...Well, no.”*

*“Well we’re either going to have to figure it out or go outside. Or I guess I can just go home.”*



*Sam and I lived across the street from each other, so it wasn't a big deal for us to come and go. However, Sam wrinkled up her nose at something I'd said.*

*"What's that face?" I asked.*

*"Why would you rather go home than go outside?"*

*"...Well, it's hot outside. And we're in your nice, cool basement."*

*"...So you're only here because it's cool?"*

*"The computer is a bonus."*

*Sam sighed. "I don't want to just play computer all day."*

*I raised my brows. "Why not? This is what I do all the time."*

*Sam shook her head. "Don't you want to go outside and swim or something?"*

*"I can't yet, I'm still on those antibiotics that make the sun hurt more."*

*The computer chair creaked as Sam shifted her weight and said, "Well...I kinda want to go swim, so maybe you should just go home."*

*I nodded, tried not to frown, and slowly walked home. This wasn't an unusual occurrence. In fact, it was a usual occurrence. When I was too unhealthy to play the way my friends wanted, I was left out or sent home. Their parents didn't want the liability of a pneumonia-prone kid staying overnight after a pool party because there was a 50% chance I would develop a cough if we spent more than 10 minutes outside with wet hair in a slight breeze. So, for neither the first or the last time, I retreated home to the safe spaces I had created for myself when the only access to fun or friends I had was through my imagination and whatever tools I had.*

*I stomped through my front door and stomped to my room. I looked around for something to give me the immediate comfort I sought, and my gaze landed on my boxed set of the Percy Jackson novels by Rick Riordan. Immediately, I picked up my*

*favorite book from the series—The Last Olympian, because it’s one of the best series finales ever—and flipped to my favorite scene. A feeling of calmness and contentment settled over me and I spent the next hour re-reading through my favorite moments.*

*Eventually, a new idea popped into my head. I went to the family computer in our family room and hit the power button. The whirs of the fans and the lovely little beep were like music to my ears—I loved any and all time I spent online. I clicked the Internet Explorer logo and typed in “fanfiction.net” and lost myself for another hour reading about what it would be like if the Percy Jackson characters were to read the books written about them. Copyright infringement aside, those fanworks were what ultimately drew me into the online fandom world. I met friends who were stuck inside too but wanted to talk about the things they loved with people they loved, and before I knew it, I had something most of my friends didn’t: an all-access pass to navigating a world they barely knew about, and the multiliteracies required to do so. However, that came with a daunting role; now I had to convince them that this purely digital and mediated world was worth their exploration, and teach them how to do it.*

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The topic I care most about discussing is something I’ve been dedicated to as long as I can remember: the importance of critical digital media literacy (DML). For the purposes of my research here in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change M.A. program at Colorado State University, I’ve expanded my thinking on this topic to include the first-year writing classroom, a place I first loved as a student and later as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. At a minimum, half of my time spent in this Master’s program has

been dedicated to students' success with the course outcomes of the College Composition sections I've taught. It's been a privilege and an honor to step into the educator role, especially in a first-year writing course, and it has allowed me to peek behind the curtain of higher education. I've been fortunate to undergo several professional development seminars, a full GTA orientation and course dedicated to our understanding of the curriculum and how to successfully manage a classroom, and mentorship meetings that allowed us to talk about the ins-and-outs of daily life as a composition instructor. However, in all of this education on how to teach writing, not a single mention of digital media literacies was made—at least overtly. A problem I noticed almost immediately is how we were so often “naming what we know” (and this isn't a diss toward Linda Addler-Kassner, who is brilliant) and naming what we didn't know that the students were lost. Conversations around teaching writing become what *we* know about students' prior knowledge and learning strategies, and how *we* utilize that knowledge to transfer material. It would be futile to argue that the skill and benefit of naming what we know, how we know it, and what to do with it—of course instructors of any material should be well equipped with that strategy. My point here is that, in naming what we know, which is admittedly a lot, many things we know slip through the cracks into what is often referred to as the “hidden curriculum,” or unintentional transfer of ideology, attitude, or behavior (see Gofton, Jerald, Cornbleth, Myles). Hidden curriculum can also refer to unspoken strategies, literacies, and expectations that students must navigate without explicitly being taught how. The most visible hidden curriculum I see in current first-year composition is within our student learning outcomes—we state what we want students to learn, but we don't simplify the learning or name the literacies necessary to that learning. Our current CO150 course outcomes are

saturated with necessity for digital media literacy, but not one mention of DML is made in the curriculum. We must begin to name ALL that we know, we must be transparent with our students about what they are learning, and we must develop strategies for teaching our students how to navigate and engage in the multiliteracies necessary for their success in learning.

Conversations surrounding digital media literacy have been primarily attributed to disciplines like journalism, communication studies, despite composition studies having a subfield attending to computers and composition. Though, looking back on my B.A. in Journalism and my M.A. in Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change coursework, I have yet to interact directly with media literacy outside of journalism and communication studies. However, as an emerging scholar, I know there are other educators out there who believe that media literacy belongs in first-year composition curriculum. Writing studies scholar Matthew Overstreet argues that “to teach writing...must be to teach—at least to an extent—everyday digital media literacy” (50). Though many writing studies scholars agree that, at the very least, multiliteracies need to be included in our curricula, there has been a lack of innovation or inclusion of these literacies thus far. When I first noticed this gap in our curriculum, I found myself wondering how to incorporate digital media literacy (arguably one of the most important literacies to learn in today’s age) into my first-year writing classroom. How would I, as an instructor and a person, teach DML? What skills do I have to show as an example of how DML can transform not only our learning, but our lives? Through my research and interest in digital and media literacies, I was drawn to the idea that fandom, and fanfiction, could be the bridge between composition and digital media literacies—and others agree. Scholars like Rebecca Black, Antero Garcia, Brittany Kelley,

Liza Potts, Tracy Kell and Kyle Stedman have all written about the powerful impact of fandom and fanfiction in a writing studies classroom. Potts, Stedman, Kelly and Black have all worked to successfully incorporate elements of fandom into their first-year writing courses by designing assignments that encourage student collaboration and identity development. Garcia and Kell are ELA scholars who used fanfiction in their middle and high school English classes to help teach critical reading and writing.

What all of these authors agree on is that fanfiction has value in teaching multiliteracies—a concept defined by the New London Group--of which there are multiple, including media, digital, functional, critical, rhetorical (nod to Stuart Selber), community, identity, modality, genre, and even research methods...there are unlimited literacies. In “I Love Your Book, but I Love My Version More: Fanfiction in the English Language Arts Classroom,” authors ELA scholars Kerri L. Mathew and Devon Christopher Adams argue that teachers have the opportunity to draw on students’ passions for their topics and include curriculum that covers the “emerging research methods that today’s students will surely need,” as well as equipping students with the skills to navigate the online tools necessary for those research methods and the “intangible aspects of learning, such as engagement and process” (Mathew). The goals and skills Matthew and Adams outline here are the same literacies and practices I want to see from my students—practices like source evaluation and research methods, developing digital and media literacies by navigating the Internet and fanworks and utilizing online tools. These digitally-mediated fandom contexts can provide salient opportunities for engaging students in developing and enacting literacy practices that have broader value and applicability outside of our classrooms. What composition instructor could argue against the inclusion of these ideas? Despite the fact that there is

research coming from communication studies, ELA studies, writing studies, and composition studies suggesting that a fandom framework for a first-year composition course is valuable and can be integral for student identity and literacy development, overall the idea hasn't gained much widespread traction, despite its validity.

Many argue that digital media literacy belongs elsewhere—but as one of the required core classes, composition has the power to reach masses of students in a way that more niche, major-specific classes like journalism and media studies just can't. I'd also argue that it is far more important for students to gain multiple literacies that all correlate with one another rather than separating them based on which discipline they fit best within—it is ludicrous to suggest that a literacy belongs in just one place. Multiple disciplines need to value and consider what it means to enact literacies in a variety of contexts, but composition studies has something to gain by studying the practices of online fandom communities. The writing classroom is a place where literacies collide, and we must address these collisions; I believe they can be productive and generative if we allow them to be. My wish for future students in writing classrooms is for them to have a holistic understanding of media, its impact on their writing and thinking, and how to critically engage with the media they consume and produce. Fortunately, I have ideas for how to make my wishes for first-year composition come true. The fact is, critical digital literacy and critical media literacy are closely intertwined, if not completely blurred at the edges at this point, because the mediums of technology dictate the rhetorics of technology—Jenkins, Purdy, and Williams have all argued that we live in a time of media convergence. You cannot separate a medium from its potential methods of inscription, or in other words, you cannot separate the message from its medium...shoutout to Marshall McLuhan for that one. Because 'digital' will

always be a descriptor before ‘media’ and never the other way around, we need to acknowledge that the materiality of critical digital literacy exists, and start making steps toward incorporating these literacies into our writing classes.

In this thesis, I employ rhetorical analysis to compare two writing programs’ integration of critical digital literacy and critical media literacy and autoethnographic methods to sketch and analyze instructor and student experiences within a first-year composition curriculum. Through these analyses, I argue that integrating fandom within the FYC curriculum provides a valuable entrypoint to meeting students within the digital worlds they already inhabit and opening those digital worlds up toward more critical media and digital literacy practices. In Chapter 1, I take a dive into the literature surrounding critical digital literacy, media literacy, and the validity of fandom/fanworks in the composition classroom. In Chapter 2, I outline my methods of comparative analysis and autoethnography and define a heuristic for comparing FYC programs and their curricula. In Chapter 3, I critically examine the University of Oklahoma’s Office of First Year Composition and Colorado State University’s University Composition Program along with their first-year composition course curricula to understand the current literacies students are expected to develop and enact in FYC. Chapter 4 holds my autoethnographic storied vignettes of moments that illuminate my students’ needs for digital media literacies and a new approach to FYC curriculum. To answer those needs, I define a fandom framework as an approach to first-year composition that is not bound by a certain theme, but rather limitless in its applications; everyone is a fan of *something*, which makes this framework accessible for all student writers in Chapter 5. To conclude, I push forward into an argument for the inclusion of materialist media theory in first-year composition, and how online fandom/fanworks can help illuminate

that need. Ultimately, this thesis will not be a definitive guide for a massive cultural shift in composition studies, but rather hopefully a nudge in the right direction. I hope to prove that critical digital and media literacy are inherently intertwined with first-year composition and students are ready for their classrooms and instructors to catch up with their digitally mediated world; I hope to provide a framework based on fandom that would make that “catching up” possible.



## CHAPTER 1: ENACTING CRITICAL DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACIES THROUGH FANDOM

In the Spring of 1996, the New London Group (NLG) published an article in which they explore the changing social conditions and demands that faced students and instructors and propose a new framework for understanding literacy, called “multiliteracies.” For the purpose of this thesis, I adopt the NLG’s definition of multiliteracies to propose a framework for first-year composition pedagogy that includes digital and media literacies. According to the NGL,

“multiliteracies...overcomes the limitations of traditional approaches [to literacy] by emphasizing how negotiating the multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to the pragmatics of the working, civic, and private lives of students” (60).

A framework of multiliteracies in a first-year composition classroom calls for the acknowledgement of student’s own languages<sup>1</sup>, inclusion of antiracist pedagogy like citational justice, and an understanding that literacy goes far beyond language. For example, I am very literate in Taylor Swift lyrics, I am gaining literacy in first-year composition, and I am completely illiterate in bluetooth technology. This view of literacy being not one single capacity but a multitude of capacities across a multitude of contexts is much more fitted for our students’ world, in which they navigate across highly mediated spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> NCTE’s “Student’s Right to Their Own Language”

In 2004, Stuart Selber published *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, in which he outlines a conceptual landscape for a potential computer multiliteracies program consisting of functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy: functional literacy describes computer as tools and students as users of technology; critical literacy describes computers as cultural artifacts and students as questioners of technology; and rhetorical literacy describes computers as hypertextual media and students as producers of technology (25). This three-literacy framework is especially useful because it can be applied to any topic, and still students will need a blend of functional, rhetorical, and critical literacies. While Selber is dedicated to arguing for a computer literacy program, he still acknowledges that “the goal is to help students both understand the ways in which all three [literacies] filter experience and become adept at using them at various times and in various combinations” (24-25). Here, I see an opportunity to engage students in a way they are not currently engaged in many of our classrooms. Our focus in many first-year composition classrooms has been on functional literacies; we place far more emphasis on a student’s ability to functionally meet the requirements of a rubric rather than a student’s ability to critically examine a rubric for a assignment, or a student’s ability to rhetorically produce a way to assess their own work. Selber describes how functional literacies have “been reduced to a simple nuts-and-bolts matter, to a fairly basic skill based on mastery of technique” (32), meaning they are seen as the literacies that enable students to be effective users of tools, but this can encompass anything from comma placement to coding to cardiac surgery.

The urge to push past the emphasis on functional literacy and to fight for a heavier blend of all three is strong, because students aren’t simply just users of digital media—they are critical examiners and producers of it as well. Students now are facing a

much different world than 1996 or 2004—we didn’t even have touch screen technology in 2004. New literacies have popped up along with new technologies and new communicative practices. Now more than ever, our lives and our students’ lives are heavily impacted by the digital rhetorics and media we consume and produce. In “Writing at the Interface: A Research and Teaching Program for Everyday Digital Media Literacy,” author Matthew Overstreet argues that

“...composition studies should do more to understand and promote networked literacy as it manifests in everyday digital media engagement patterns. With smart phones and broadband internet, media—as in digitally mediated information—permeates every aspect of our world...Writing teachers need to recognize and respond to this new (mediated) reality” (48).

I believe the most effective way to respond to this rapidly changing ‘mediated reality’ is to include critical digital and media literacies through the framework of the NLG and Selber’s multiliteracies into first-year composition curriculum. As scholar Mary K. Stewart notes, “the pedagogy of multiliteracies recommends we teach students the broad life skills (lifelong learning, strategic thinking, critical consumption of information, flexible navigation of the various media that make meaning) required to navigate a society marked by such rapid change” (Stewart). Thus, we acknowledge that there is no way to know what literacies and genres will be most important twenty years from now because we anticipate inevitable evolution and variation, but we can enable students to enact multiliteracies across a range of times, contexts, and genres. However, there is much overlap between the terms digital and media literacy, with digital media literacy being an entirely separate yet still related term. In order to move forward with

my argument for their inclusion, these terms must first be thoroughly explored and defined, as well as the practices and skills associated with them.

### **Critical Digital Literacy**

Digital literacy, at its most basic definition, is the ability to effectively navigate, consume, analyze, engage, and produce within digital spaces. The separation of analysis and production is important when discussing any literacy, because the ability to analyze something is vastly different from the ability to produce it. Selber argues that students are users of tools equally as they are producers of tools and questioners of tools, but functional literacies are different from rhetorical literacies. Depending on the context or process, analysis or production may be valued over the other, or they may be equally intertwined. Regardless, it remains important to pick apart the differences between analysis and production because both are skills that are necessary to becoming most effectively digitally literate. The production side of digital literacy asks us to display capacities for creation through digital methods, mediums, and platforms, like my ability to use my MacBook Pro to inscribe words in a digital document and then take said document from a Google Doc to a Word document to a PDF in 30 seconds flat. To be digitally literate through a production lens is important, and is in many ways tangential to Selber's functional and rhetorical literacies. For a student to be rhetorically digitally literate, they must be able to know *how* to produce hypertextual media—i.e., exhibit functional digital literacy.

To begin a discussion of the analysis function of digital literacy, I want to begin with two questions that Overstreet poses to help writing instructors analyze everyday digital literacy practices: “What sort of literacy behaviors do digital devices and social

media platforms encourage, discourage? How do our means of connection shape how we think, write, read, and relate?” (53). These two questions start to frame a picture of what digital rhetoric is and does, but more importantly, the skills we need to develop to be digitally literate, like critically analyzing our “means of connection” or rhetorically engaging with algorithms that can influence behavior. Along with critically analyzing our consumption of digital media came a key component of digital literacy: “information literacy, generally understood as the ability to navigate the vast “text-based communities and economies” available online (Kapitzle 2001), including the related issues of privacy and security (Davidson 2014b)” (Stewart). However, many scholars argue that focusing on information too much within the digital literacy conversation can lead to a certain level of technological determinism, or the belief that technology determines how and when society advances. Buckingham argues that information literacy scholarship barely recognizes “the symbolic or persuasive aspects of digital media, of the emotional dimensions of our uses and interpretations of these media, or indeed of aspects of digital media that exceed mere information” (2014b). Regardless, it is still a cornerstone of digital literacy, and is necessary to mention because it helps us differentiate critical digital literacy from critical media literacy, which will be discussed in the next section. In order to fully understand how digital literacy is enacted in a classroom, I turn toward scholarship from composition studies that provides details for including and assessing those skills in first-year writing.

Similar to Selber’s three-pronged approach, scholar Mary K. Stewart proposed her own framework for defining and assessing critical digital literacy in a classroom. In her webtext titled “The Social Practice of Digital Literacy in the Internet Age: Multimodal Composition, Information, and Collaboration,” Stewart teases out three

characteristics of digital literacy that “can guide the design and assessment of digital literacy as a learning outcome in college writing courses: (1) multimodal composition, (2) information, and (3) collaboration” (Stewart). In other words, Stewart argues that students must be skilled in online collaboration, networked information, and multimodal composition to be considered effectively digitally literate. This framework combines both analysis and production; student ability to critically engage and analyze a text, but also critically and rhetorically produce a text. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published a similar sentiment in a position statement titled “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age.” In this document, NCTE outlines several elements of a framework for literacy in a digital age, including “participating critically in a networked world, consuming, curating, and creating actively across contexts, and building intentional connections...to solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought” (NCTE). Ultimately, this positions the first-year composition instructor’s job as helping our students develop digital media and multimodal literacies and communicative practices that equip them to navigate the many rhetorical situations they face both in and out of the classroom.

Digital literacy scholar Anne Wysocki agrees, and argues that responsible teachers “help our students (as well as ourselves) learn how different choices of visual arrangement...encourage different kinds of meaning making” (Takyoshi and Selfe 2). This can include everything from multimodal composition to media rhetorical analysis and production. For a first-year writing course, Stewart proposes that “instructors can incorporate multimodal composition by asking students to produce digital media, or to justify why one particular (digital or nondigital) combination of modes is the most appropriate given the students' rhetorical goals” (Stewart). However, when we ask our

students to engage in the creation of digital media, we're asking them to engage in multiliteracies, including digital and media literacies, which are two separate sets of skills. I fear we often neglect media literacy as it can fall under digital media literacies, but media literacy is an important factor in this conversation as without it, we fail to properly incorporate the material dimensions that surround these literacies.

### **Critical Media Literacy**

Drawing on Buckingham, Hilton, and Luke, media scholars Alvermann, Moon, and Hagwood describe critical media literacy as “about creating communities of active readers and writers who can be expected to exercise some degree of agency in deciding what textual positions they will assume or resist as they interact in complex social and cultural contexts” (Alvermann et al). Once again, we can draw on Selber’s framework to explore the multiliteracies within critical media literacy. Alvermann et al. focuses on rhetorical literacy, whereas Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share argue that “media literacy helps people to use media intelligently, to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, and to construct alternative media” (372), which includes mentions of functional and critical literacies as well. For our students, critical media literacy is about “analyzing media culture as products of social production and struggle and teaching students to be critical of media representations and discourses, but also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism” (Kellner and Share 372). In my opinion, this is where critical media literacy diverges from critical digital literacy—CML explicitly encourages students to use media for self-expression and social activism, and can use popular media to help students explore issues like multicultural literacy,

dominant and marginalized representations in mainstream media, and oppression. CML emphasizes the importance of popular media and culture as cornerstones in our development as students, scholars, and citizens. As Cory Lawson Ching notes, “sometimes tools have their own agendas” (6). Yes, they absolutely do, and we must equip our students to interrogate how those agendas may or may not serve them or their communities. Once again, functional, rhetorical, and critical literacies are all interwoven in building critical media literacy.

Critical media literacy belongs in writing studies because of its power to engage students in multiliteracies that equip them to critically examine, deconstruct, and reconstruct issues, just like critical and rhetorical literacies do in a regular first-year composition classroom. The fact is, as Mark Deuze, a well-known media scholar, notes, we live inside a “mediapolis . . . a comprehensively mediated public space where media underpin and overarch the experiences and expressions of everyday life” (137). Because we not only live in these conditions, but *teach and learn and write* in these conditions, Overstreet argues that “it is no longer practical to teach writing without considering how non-academic literacy behaviors in general and digital media engagement patterns in particular, shape what and how we write. Networked individuals live in media” (50-51). Many of my students consume media in my classroom, whether it's through the lofi girl stream<sup>2</sup> on YouTube projected on the screen for work time, or having one AirPods in while listening to my lecture, or scrolling through social media and sharing posts with their group mates during group activities. While I cannot argue that their consumption of media actively or heavily impacts their writing in my classroom, it ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> Lofi Girl and Lofi Boy single handedly got me through this thesis. Shoutout to the lofigirl Youtube channel.



constructs their learning and writing conditions, so instructors would be irresponsible to ignore student media practices. Unfortunately, according to the Media Literacy Clearinghouse, only 7 states in the U.S. include some sort of media thread in their core curriculum, which explains why media literacy has been lacking in widespread inclusion across multiple different contexts, but most notably composition studies.

Teaching critical media literacy can be difficult, as there is no true established pedagogy or textual canon to draw from. As a general framework, the Center for Media Literacy outlines five core concepts for guiding students toward critical media literacy:

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

If we construct activities, assignments, and discussion around these five core concepts, we begin to see how critical media literacies in a classroom can take shape. We can begin to see how, as Westbrook notes, “the ethos of critical media instruction is grounded in analysis of textual power relations,” (157) which is not unlike critical digital literacy pedagogy. Westbrook goes on to argue that “in order to teach critical media literacy, educators may encourage students to work from cultural studies forms of analysis of media to ask questions such as: Who is represented in these texts? Who is representing these groups?” (157). To teach critical media literacy is to encourage and engage in discussions where both instructors and students can describe, decode, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and produce media. Westbrook concludes with an argument that

critical media literacy “centers styles of instruction that empower and transform the ways in which teachers, students, and technologies collaborate to analyze mediated social structures” (158). This collaborative, transformational mindset is what I intend to emphasize in the next section, when I push forward an argument for fandom and fanfiction as a bridge between critical digital and media literacies.

Before I advance, I find it necessary to attempt to tease out the key differences between a digital literacy approach and a media literacy approach. However, I find myself turned toward the argument that whatever differences in practice between the two literacies have ultimately disappeared in this era of “media convergence” that we’re living in, a time in which the distinctions between genres, mediums, and modalities have “collapsed,” argues Overstreet (50). Scholars like Jenkins, Purdy, and Williams have all pointed toward this so-called collapse, and argued for a better understanding of the digitally mediated world we inhabit and how it shapes our culture and communicative practices. Of course, that doesn’t mean that the separate entities of critical digital literacy and critical media literacy are gone; there is still much to learn from their differences in approach. Traditional media studies is typically more concerned with viewing pieces of media as texts and analyzing public media and pop culture for insight into what it means to communicate through media. In composition, we tend to focus more on the actual processes and practices of producing, circulating, and analyzing texts. But it really seems like we’re doing the same thing with different vocabularies. The two disciplines have different perspectives, but we’re ultimately interested in the same things: purposes, rhetorical situations, circulating media. We’re all working with the same rhetorical triangle, but media studies and composition studies have historically emphasized different points on the triangle. Regardless of the historical

disciplinary approach, though, the practices associated with demonstrating each literacy have completely converged and overlapped until they are practically indistinguishable. Utilizing a framework like fandom to acknowledge this new combined digital media perspective is a low-stakes, high-access way to incorporate digital media literacies into the first-year composition classroom.

### **Fanfiction as a Bridge**

One of the most fruitful intersections of critical digital and media literacies is fandom and fanworks. As composition scholars and students of the rhetorical situation, we understand the interplay between author, audience, purpose, text, and context. Building off this idea, critical media studies asks us to look closer at the definitions and relationship between author and audience. For many in the media industry, audience is another word for market; people become how much they are able to pay attention to, click, and consume. When an industry can convince its audience to click more and consume more, a fandom is most often born, though they often refuse to name it that. The most fundamental definition of fandom I can identify is that of an affinity group, or a group of people affectively dedicated to a person, place, or thing. But there's obviously more to being in a fandom than being affectively dedicated to something, because I'm affectively dedicated to my Ph.D. program and I would not say I'm in a fandom for it. Fandom is thus being affectively dedicated to the negotiation, participation, and consumption of a person, place, or thing, as well as the culture surrounding it. To be in a fandom is to derive joy and meaning from engagement with other people who derive joy and meaning from the same thing. Fandom is inherently a consumer market on steroids. Henry Jenkins, a prolific fandom studies scholar, wrote:

“fans are responding to products that are mass-produced and distributed for commercial profit, and they intervene in those practices to generate forms of culture that more fully address their own fantasies, desires, and interests. As fan activities migrate into new media platforms, their activities are also often taking place within commercial contexts, where their attention is commodified, their data are extracted and sold, and their texts are claimed as the intellectual property of the host companies” (22).

However, as Jenkins goes on to say, participating in fandom could be a way to teach critical media literacy, to teach students how to recognize their own commodification and utilize it to their advantage. Jenkins writes, “fandom may become a force of resistance to some of those commercial logics, with fans mobilizing rapidly to challenge corporate decisions that run counter to their perceived interests” (22). Equipping our students with the skills and literacies necessary to navigate the highly digital media-dominant world is important for more than just our classrooms and our learning outcomes. Teaching students critical digital media literacy, or the ability to critically engage with what, how, and why they consume, lends itself to questioning what, how, and why authors produce. We’re still firmly within the rhetorical triangle that serves as the foundation for many first-year composition classrooms—we’re simply tweaking it a bit to become more inclusive of the lives our students currently live. Our focus must shift along with our students; if they have been firmly situated as consumers for so long, we must allow space for students to learn how to be active, critical, and engaged consumers, and one of the best ways to incorporate these lessons into first-year writing classrooms is by tapping into what students are already consuming.

As Paul Booth argues in one of many essays defending fandom in the classroom, “Studying fandom in the classroom is crucial because people never stop watching media, and their fandom of that media will help guide how they see their culture. I strive for my students to critically evaluate contemporary culture” (Booth). Similarly, Jenkins has spent much of his career showcasing how fandom “is helping to work through contemporary debates around diversity and inclusion, race and gender in American society” (14). In fact, many composition and writing studies scholars have already begun capitalizing on fandom and fanworks in first-year composition curriculum (see Kelley, Black, Hincke). Online fandom is well-known to host a variety of different potential skill sets and literacies. Much like other composition scholars, Booth argues that “we need to teach students how to be civil, how to disagree responsibly, and how to debate with respect...” however he branches off when he includes how “fandom can offer a bastion of critical thinking in a world of conformity. In other words, we need to teach how to be critical and thoughtful fans in a world increasingly hostile to affect” (1). Booth argues that fan identity can become something of a catalyst for making critical intellectual shifts to our thinking, such as learning to engage in discourse in deeper ways and identifying and criticizing hegemonic culture. We must foster our own sense of critical fandom in order to plant those seeds in new minds, concludes Booth, for being a fan is a responsibility, not a privilege. In a first-year writing classroom, skills like critical thinking, civil and civic engagement, and public conversation are what we strive for, but we do so in a way that doesn’t always connect with our students as well as fandom might. Assignments that ask students to engage with a specific topic or genre are limiting, but we could give students more freedom, and in turn, this freedom might lend itself to more transferable learning. Katherine DeLuca, a prominent fanfiction scholar,

builds on this idea and offers a key lesson composition instructors can impart when specifically including online fandom pedagogy in their courses:

“By offering students a site of public and civic engagement that already matters and is meaningful to them, teachers can potentially create a student-centered approach to composition and literacy learning that highlights and values students’ passions, interests, and what they believe to constitute meaningful communication for change” (76).

Katherine DeLuca has spent much time arguing for the validity of fanfiction in writing studies, but recently she published an article discussing online fandom communities and summed up three key lessons that students can learn from online fandom pedagogy: “1) locating new publics for public writing, 2) making affective engagements central to our pedagogy, and 3) teaching transferable skills for public writing and composition” (76). If the first-year writing classroom’s role is to equip students with the fundamental skills of engaging with society in a responsible, effective way while also teaching the literacies necessary for success in an academic setting, it seems that participation in online fandom could be an avenue toward more successful teaching-for-transfer of the skills that are necessary both inside and outside of our classrooms.

Another facet of fanfiction that collides with first-year writing outcomes is that it lends to identity development and construction of writer voice because you can’t write or read fanfiction without somehow engaging with the community. In turn, the more a fan interacts with others (and others writing), the more they are able to draw comparisons and conclusions about their own identity within the community. Jwa writes, “In the fanfiction community, most spaces are designed to promote affiliation and to allow easy access to all sorts of information, e.g., the writer’s personal

information, fanfictions he or she has written, his or her favorite authors and stories, and communities he or she is involved in” (337). Sharing and communicating are staples of the fanfiction community, which is why most who are well-versed in the community are likely to have developed their writer voice and identity. Similarly, Elizabeth Swaggerty and Kelly Bahoric argue that, within the fanfiction community, the participatory culture and engagement with technology and online spaces allows for a plethora of opportunities for growth in literacy skills, reading, and writing, no matter where you are. Swaggerty and Bahoric argue that “the examination of genre and various styles of writing is an integral part of literacy studies, and members of fanfiction communities explore writing styles and genres through writing fanfic.” (26) Students can and will learn new literacies when exploring new contexts, including those like online fandom or other digital media environments.

An obvious draw of including fandom and fanworks in a first-year composition curriculum is student engagement. In “Fanfiction Writing and the Construction of Space,” author Rebecca W. Black discusses how the design of online fanfiction websites and user literacy practices shape access to language-learning and literacy, especially for young English language learners. In the classroom, students write primarily for their GPAs, very seldom for the enjoyment of it, and very seldom getting joy from it. Fanfiction, however, is vastly different. Black writes, “fans are using language and writing to create and generate meaning that will be read and enjoyed by other members of the site, rather than graded and discarded. Additionally, fanfiction writers are rewarded for creating innovative texts that push the limits of traditional genres and formats of writing” (393). This is everything a revolutionary curriculum could be! It is important to note that most would agree the goal of first-year composition is to be a

gateway for acclimating students to academic literacies and genres, and to help students transition into more discipline-specific genres later. However, the beauty of fanfiction is that it is a metagenre that allows for multiple genres to exist within it. There are fanfictions out there that are written entirely in chain email threads, or business proposals, or formal letters. Fanfiction helps students connect with the subject in order to connect better with the genre. “Fanfiction serves as a welcome archive of creation that allows for fans to write the stories they want to see come to life” in whatever creative, multimodal way they desire (Riley). What fanfiction gives students that regular academic genres don’t is the opportunity for joy, low-stakes writing assignments, and the kind of natural collaboration that occurs between communities in the public sphere.

This natural collaboration is highly affected and dependent on the online tools associated with the creation and consumption of fanfiction. In “Chocolate Frogs for My Beta!: Practicing Literacy at One Online Fanfiction Website,” author Brittany Kelley demonstrates how online fanfiction is the result of how digital tools affect writing communities. She outlines the general literacy and reading practices of fans, how fan writers view and evaluate writing. Kelley describes a certain “preoccupation with ‘grammar’ and ‘appropriate’ canon—or ‘getting canon right’” (50). This demonstrates a care for both form and function, but it’s also a great example of how there are rules even in the spaces that seem lawless, like fanfiction. I think this might be an audience concern, that fanfiction can’t truly be taught in the classroom to build technical skills because there’s no oversight of what’s online, but we can control more in our curriculums. Kelly isn’t saying fanfiction should be the curriculum, but it can certainly be *adapted into* the curriculum. This is where we begin to see the intersections between critical digital and media literacies with the first-year composition learning outcomes.



To further prove how fandom and fanfiction belong in a writing course, Kerri L. Mathew and Devon Christopher Adams argue that

“The freedom of information and fan writers’ willingness to draw from the vast resources of the Internet provide an opportunity for educators to broaden curriculum to include lessons on source evaluation and reliability, as well as emerging research methods that today’s students will surely need. Utilizing the growing number of online tools allows teachers to assess intangible aspects of learning, such as engagement and process.”

For writing studies scholars, Antero Garcia argues for fanfiction as a valid form of writing, and aims to prove that online fanfiction, more than regular commercially published fiction, is more likely to encourage young readers to share and circulate literature. Garcia writes, “Throughout the story, readers highlight and comment. A plethora of reading strategies are at use in these comments: Readers make connections, draw conclusions, predict, and generally make their metacognitive processes visible for other readers, and sometimes even the author, to see.” (356). The genre and medium of online fanfiction allows for a unique interaction between author, audience, and purpose, and ultimately helps composition instructors face the “media convergence” and ultimate collapse of boundaries between digital and media literacies. In the following section, I develop a heuristic for exploring how composition instructors might evaluate their own curricula for critical digital media literacies.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODS

The main goal of my research is to explore the potential viability of a fandom approach toward integrating digital and media literacies in first-year writing curricula. To understand the current attitude toward critical digital literacy, I chose two separate first-year composition programs that I have personally been involved with and analyzed them for literacy practices. Two interrelated research questions guide my inquiry: What visible, publicly-facing artifacts developed by Colorado State University and Oklahoma University demonstrate evidence of the integration of digital and media literacies within curriculum? And, how do students and instructors experience digital and media literacies in our Composition 150 curriculum at CSU? By juxtaposing these questions, I'm able to not only showcase a top-down view of real, current first-year composition curricula and how it engages digital and media literacies, but also provide a bottom-up perspective of real student and instructor voices as storied vignettes to show how the curricula looks in classroom practice. Each provides a differential scope in terms of the analysis it affords. Guiding my framework is Creswell and Crewswell's *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* published in 2018. *Research Design* works to help scholars navigate different methodologies, but most important for my research was the guidance for how to design a mixed methods approach, like embedding both quantitative and qualitative data into a larger framework and the validity of incorporating both close-ended and open-ended data to respond to my research questions.

## Overview of Data and Methods

In my first data chapter, Chapter 3, I seek to answer the first question through a comparative analysis of two composition programs: Colorado State University's University Composition Program and the University of Oklahoma's Office of First-Year Composition. I chose comparative analysis for my primarily quantitative data because, as Benoît Rihoux notes in "A Retrospective and Prospective View on Qualitative Comparative Analysis," this methodology was launched by Charles Ragin in 1987 as a way to skip between qualitative and quantitative strategies. Most importantly, comparative analysis "is a case-sensitive approach...[it] develops a conception of causality that leaves room for complexity" (Rihoux 352). To perform this analysis, I visited OU's Office of FYC website and CSU's UCP website to gather materials to examine, including mission statements, visible faculty roles and numbers, student demographics, and other artifacts that demonstrate program and curricular choices. I also collected sample assignment prompts for both curricula as well as sample syllabi. For CSU, I was able to use my own materials given to me by my composition faculty. For OU, I located their application for the Conference on College Composition and Communication's Writing Program of Excellence Award on their website, which included sample syllabi and sample assignment prompts, as well as program demographics and value statements. All of these documents can be found in the Appendix. I performed this analysis with the goal of understanding and comparing the programs' stated values and pedagogy. After describing what I found to be each program's vision, pedagogical goals, and infrastructure, I end my comparative analysis by rhetorically analyzing their website designs and how transparent each program was about their pedagogical goals and the people responsible for choosing and implementing

those goals. Throughout this comparative process, I kept asking myself, *Where do I see critical digital literacy? Where do I see critical media literacy? Where do I see opportunities for their inclusion within the existing curricular structure?*

In my second data chapter, Chapter 4, I seek to answer the second question through evocative and analytic autoethnography. To supplement my comparative analysis of programs, I offer an autoethnographic review of my experience as the instructor of record of six first-year composition classes over the course of two years at Colorado State University.<sup>3</sup> I chose to incorporate autoethnographic methods because my experience as an instructor watching my students engage with my curriculum has been invaluable to developing my argument. Leon Anderson, who coined the term analytic autoethnography, and Carolyn Ellis, who is arguably the most prolific evocative autoethnography scholar in writing studies, have guided my mixed approach. I've chosen elements of both approaches; I've taken Anderson's key features of analytic autoethnography, which include "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (378), and I've taken elements of Ellis's evocative autoethnography as well, including inspiration from her statement, "Wasn't there something valuable in provoking readers to see themselves in our work and react emotionally to what we wrote?" (124). Despite my status as a GTA and master's student, I hope to reflect the same vision for composition that my esteemed peers hold, and show that the experiences my students and I have in my classroom are valuable learning tools for the critical examination of our own curricula.

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<sup>3</sup> I hope you enjoy reading through student complaints as much as I do, because you're in for a real treat.

My students can be vocal about what they believe would be more beneficial for their learning, and it's been really interesting to reflect on past in-class surveys and office-hour conversations with students about the curriculum. By exploring how students and instructors experience digital and media literacies, or the lack of them, I hope to show an exigency of and validity behind a potential change to first-year composition pedagogy to include critical digital and media literacy through fandoms.

In order to explore how first-year composition programs may or may not be incorporating digital and media literacies into their curricula, I developed a heuristic for identifying and analyzing how composition programs are situated within their universities based on a university's demographics, the composition program demographics, and more; I also developed a heuristic for understanding, identifying, and incorporating digital and media literacies in a first-year composition classroom. I will use these heuristics for my analysis of my data. Additionally, I find it important for any scholar developing a heuristic to include their own positionality, as this heavily affects what a heuristic emphasizes and what it doesn't. My positionality and past experience with critical digital literacy informed my heuristic in crucial ways.

## **My Positionality**

I was born in January of 1999. I like to think there's something really special about being born on the cusp of a new century, and I always joke that I absorbed the Y2K anxiety in a bad way. Anyway, being born in 1999 means I wasn't in the first generation on the Internet, nor were we the first to experience social media—but we were certainly the first to interact with this newly accessible technology so young. Thinking culturally about the advancements in technology over the course of my 24

years of life is somewhat overwhelming—we went from indestructible Nokia’s to shattered iPhone screens in less than a decade. I grew up on the Internet—and not just the child-proof parts of it. I saw and read a lot of horrific things before I ever turned 10, just like most of Gen Z has. Sadly, the scary parts of what this technology allowed were overshadowed by the fun we could have with it. I had an iPod Nano that let me listen to music whenever and wherever I wanted, and I had all the freedom to download whatever songs I wanted, so long as someone supplied the iTunes cards. I started with Hannah Montana but soon I was downloading Wiz Khalifa (which my parents found and promptly deleted, which was fair, because I was 9). My first-generation iPod Touch was my first camera, my first video recorder, and my first introduction to social media and online fandoms. Our technology made the media we consume more accessible than ever, and in many ways, I was grateful for this all-access pass to the world. Now, as I reflect on my experiences with the Internet and technology and media, I wish I would’ve known how to navigate it all better. We need to help children and young adults develop critical digital and media literacies that help them navigate our highly digital and mediated world—had I known then what I know now, I probably wouldn’t have stumbled into horrific videos of animal abuse, I probably wouldn’t have clicked on ads that led to questionable sites that ultimately crashed my grandmother’s computer, and I probably wouldn’t have been exposed to the extremely predatory site Omegle—a site that, in part, functioned to connect people via video chat from anywhere in the world—where I saw multiple sets of male genitalia before I even hit age 12. The point is, had I had any awareness of the predatory nature of ads, algorithms, and the consequences of my clicks, my grandma wouldn’t have lost her computer and I wouldn’t have nearly lost my mind.

The cultural history behind being a member of Gen Z and experiencing these advancements in media and society is important, but so is my personal history. It is important to understand that not every child had as much interaction with the Internet and media as I did. As soon as I popped out of the womb, it was clear I was unhealthy, and my life was going to look different from my peers. In elementary school, I missed weeks and weeks of class due to my severe asthma (it was so bad, doctors had me tested for cystic fibrosis 3 separate times because they didn't believe I didn't have it). During my sick days, when I couldn't even speak or eat without coughing, I would watch television, or read books, or play games on the Internet. Doctor visits and hospital stays always resulted in a new movie on DVD, or a new Webkinz to play with online. My reward and my solace came in the form of media interaction because I had nothing else. None of your friends want to come play with you when you're actively coughing up chunks of mucus that you have to spit into a trash can every 45 seconds. My life became highly dominated by the time I spent alone with media, because I had little opportunity to see my friends outside of school. When I would come back to school having blown through an entire catalog of movies and books, it was all I wanted to talk about: Have you read this book? Have you seen this movie? What did you think about this character? But I often failed to consider that my peers had much less time to sit around and consume media, and they also probably had less care and dependence on it. See, when you grow up feeling so isolated from your peers, you tend to form relationships elsewhere. That's obvious, right? As my physical friendships from school sometimes dwindled, I learned how to replace them with online interactions and meeting new people through social networking and gaming sites. Of course, seeking out new online friendship is also how I ended up on the cursed Omegle, which is why I wish I would've

known more about sites to avoid as a young adolescent, but overall, my ability to navigate the web is what kept me socializing with people my age. Without my access to technology and media, I fear I would've had no access to anything at all.

This became even more true as I grew older and started missing school due to surgeries; my dependence on media consumption grew, as did my dependence on technology in general. From the pullout couch in my family room in either a full leg brace or an ankle boot, I would dream of the day I would be able to get back to life as normal without crutches or wheelchairs or any other mobility inconveniences. The only way for me to actively participate in my friends' lives was through social media. Once social media became popular around middle school, I was finally able to stay in contact with my friends, despite missing school. I finally didn't feel like I was missing out on their lives, because I could watch it all happen through Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook. However, my life still looked drastically different from my friends' lives. Chronic pain brought new levels of isolation; I wasn't always down to hang which meant I wasn't always invited to hang. Soon enough, I felt so separated from my in-real-life or IRL friends that the communities I had formed online became my primary source of escape and engagement. Once I discovered online fandoms, I spent more time reading fanfiction on Tumblr than I did speaking with my friends. I fear that I place too much emphasis on the importance of media literacy because it has been such a dominant influence on my own life, and I must remind myself that not everyone interacts with media as much and as dependently as I do, especially in regard to fandom. Though, had I not been as literate in digitally, mediated spaces, I probably wouldn't have had the same type of access to the world, and to potential friendships, as I did. However, though my time spent online may outweigh others, it's still important that everyone understand



the power and literacies that come with the digital, mediated spaces like the Internet and social media. For many disabled and neurodivergent folks, including me sometimes, digital spaces are our only access to the public sphere, and it's important that all students and instructors be literate in those practices because whether it's through a horrific surprise or a gradual decline, everyone becomes disabled as they age, and access becomes more important.

The incorporation and importance of digital and media literacies is an issue worth exploring in writing studies; I might even say necessary, as would scholars like Overstreet, Jenkins, and Williams. So much of our learning outside the classroom is dictated by the media we consume. Our socialization is highly affected by what we read, watch, and pay attention to; why would our writing be any different? Furthermore, the methods of composing writing we ask students to engage in are heavily dominated by digital modes, and it's more important than ever that students understand how to navigate the digital spaces that they spend their time learning within. As an accessible entrypoint to both digital and media literacies, online fandoms can be used as the bridge between the two. Focusing on fanfiction specifically, students can and will learn how to write through reading fanfiction and captions on social media; it is natural to pick up on rhythms, structures, and language this way. I know that my time spent on Tumblr, Twitter, and fanfiction websites like fanfiction.net and archiveofourown.org have impacted the way I speak, write, and think, and I know that time spent with media does the same for all our students. I believe media literacy needs to be incorporated into first-year writing studies because the act of writing itself is an act of media literacy.

Furthermore, media literacy allows more understanding of how the world around us helps shape the texts we consume and produce. Fandom acts as a bridge to explain how

our interaction with media affects the way we think. Not only is fandom an excellent community builder, but media in general is conducive to productive generation of ideas. Are my students subconsciously or consciously integrating the media they consume into their writing in my classroom? I don't know that yet. I do know that many of their research topics tend to correlate strongly with recent trending topics on social media sites like Twitter and TikTok. Students actively engage in social media and media consumption in my classroom as they are learning—what impact does that have on whether students retain the information? I have questions about the legitimacy of fandom in a writing classroom, but critical digital media literacy as a whole must be seen as a necessity for both students and educators.

### **A Heuristic for Analyzing University Composition Programs**

To analyze and compare two composition programs, I've come up with a set of heuristics, or categories, of sites for exploration including university demographics, required courses, and visible pedagogy.

*Table 1: Heuristics for Situating the Composition Program within the University*

Heuristic	Questions
Instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–How many instructors support the program?</li> <li>–What types of instructors support the program?</li> <li>–Is there public-facing information</li> </ul>

	<p>regarding instructor identities and biographies?</p> <p>–What percentage of instructors are contingent-faculty or GTAs?</p>
University Demographics	<p>–What communities does the institution most prominently serve?</p> <p>–What are the student demographics?</p> <p>–What are the faculty demographics?</p> <p>–What is the size of the university?</p> <p>–Where is the university located?</p>
University Resources	<p>–What university resources are readily available through the composition program’s website?</p> <p>–Is there a Writing Center? Is it visible through the composition website?</p> <p>–Is there a Student Disability/Accessibility Center? Is it visible through the composition website?</p> <p>–Is there a LGBTQIA+ Center? Is it visible through the composition website?</p> <p>–Are there cultural centers on campus? Are they visible through the composition</p>

	website?
Offered Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Are there required composition courses?</li> <li>–If so, what are they, and what curriculum requirements do they fulfill?</li> <li>–What other courses does the composition program offer?</li> </ul>
Visible Ideology/Values	–Are there visible, public-facing artifacts that demonstrate the program’s ideology/values?
Visible Pedagogy/Curriculum	–Are there visible, public-facing artifacts that demonstrate the program’s pedagogy/curriculum?

To identify and incorporate digital and media literacies in first-year composition curriculum, I must first define a heuristic for doing so. I’ve based my framework here off Stuart Selber’s reimagining of multiliteracies in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, in which he describes the three foundational literacies—functional, rhetorical, and critical—and justifies his organization:

“...the functional category is organized by a tool metaphor that stresses effective computer use, the critical category is organized by an artifactual metaphor that

stresses informed critique, and the rhetorical category is organized by a  
hypertextual metaphor that stresses reflective practice” (24).

This framework is especially useful for exploring digital and media literacies because it acknowledges the materiality and functionality, the rhetorical capacities, and the importance for critical engagement that comes along with both digital and media literacies. Using this set of heuristics also makes it easier to see the values of a program from the top-down perspective.

*Table 2: For Identifying and Incorporating Literacy Practices: Taken from Selber’s Multiliteracies*

Literacies	Functional Literacy	Rhetorical Literacy	Critical Literacy
Base Definition	Students as users	Students as producers	Students as questioners
Intersection with Media Literacy	Students as users of media; Media as tools	Students as producers of hypertext media	Students as questioners of media; Media as cultural artifacts
Intersection with Digital Literacy	Students as users of digital technologies and rhetorics; Digital technologies and	Students as producers of digital technologies and rhetorics	Students as questioners of digital technologies and rhetorics; Digital

	<p> rhetorics as tools </p>		<p> technologies and  rhetorics as  cultural artifacts </p>
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## CHAPTER 3: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: OU VS. CSU

In this section, I've chosen to compare and analyze the composition program I went through as a student—the University of Oklahoma's First-Year Composition—and the composition program I've dealt with as a GTA instructor—Colorado State University's First-Year Composition. Not only are these experiences and programs inherently contrasted because I served in differing, almost dialectically opposed roles, but because they exist in different physical locations. Ultimately, the program I learned from and the program I taught in are similar in rhetorical approach, but not necessarily similar in material practice. To locate the values associated with each university's FYC program, I will perform a comparative analysis of their websites and curriculum to determine how each program functions within the scope of the university, and if either program supports student development of media or digital literacies.

### **The University of Oklahoma's Office of First-Year Composition**

The University of Oklahoma (OU) is a public research university in Norman, Oklahoma. OU's FYC website houses this quote on the home page:

**“The Office of First-Year Composition** is committed to **rhetorical education**. As our students prepare **both writing and speaking assignments**, they practice communication skills learned from across the disciplines. Building such skills allows them to **become respectful and effective participants in civil discourse**. OU's FYC curriculum works to help **build a citizenship composed of individuals** that are **capable of**

**rationally analyzing discourse** and using that analysis to **productively communicate in the public sphere.**” (bolding added by me)

OU’s FYC program offers the two required composition courses outlined by university policy, English 1113: Principles of English Composition and English 1213: Principles of English Composition II, and then several other lower-division composition courses that act as bridge programs and supplemental education. The curricula for English 1113 and 1213 are determined by OU FYC’s teaching philosophy and research as outlined on their website. English 1113 includes assignment topics based on students’ own examinations of their values, values that conflict with their own, and how shared values impact social change. Assignment genres vary, but all courses include both written work and oral presentations. According to their course arc description, “Rather than arguing immediately with the “opposition,” our students are taught to spend time listening to gain a better understanding of another’s perspective. The emphasis placed on understanding the motivations behind beliefs, opinions, and actions in English 1113 prepares students to continue with the slow argument process in English 1213.” English 1213 conducts more research into specific issues students are interested in and focuses on rhetorical moves to persuade specific stakeholders. The fact that OU utilizes a course sequence implies certain assumptions about the teaching of writing—the requirement of 2 core writing courses taken in the first year is interesting, because it’s a more in-depth exploration into student writing, but it’s still a simple Composition I to Composition II sequence used widely across the U.S. The fact that this university is situated in the middle of the U.S., physically surrounded by rural areas, affects who designed their curricula, who teaches the classes, and what they may value.



Interestingly, OU's program is labeled the "Office of First-Year Composition," which implies a certain position, because it is not a department or a full program—it is simply an "office." They are housed under the Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences, but I don't see them linking themselves to a specific department. In navigating to their "About" page, OU's FYC specifically outlines their philosophy, course arc, and supporting faculty. In their own words, the Office of First-Year Composition serves OU's students and faculty by

"preparing instructors to successfully teach course and unit objectives, designing policies to support instructors and students, mediating disputes between instructors and FYC students, supporting students and instructors during any grade appeals for FYC unit projects, providing a safe environment for you to share concerns about your FYC classes or instructors, answering questions about FYC policies or procedures, having an optimistic view of students and instructors."

The University of Oklahoma's First-Year Composition Program was selected to receive the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 2017-2018 Writing Program Certificate of Excellence, in which the selection committee noted "the way the program promotes 'rhetorical education' through 'civic empathy.'" OU's Department of English, and thus most of its composition classes, are housed in one building equipped with three computer mediated classrooms. OU's Writing Center, while not affiliated with OU's FYC, is linked as the first resource for students on their website, though further investigation says it's a bit of a walk from the student dorms, but it is close to the student center on campus. The Office of First-Year Composition is, according to their potentially inaccurate website, supported by a FYC-specific team led by a Director,

Associate Director, Senior Assistant Director, and two Assistant Directors. The program itself is supported by at least 35 Graduate Teaching Assistants, 12 Adjunct Faculty members, and 21 Assistant Teaching Professors. GTAs are required to attend 2 professional development workshops on teaching each semester, while Adjunct instructors are only required to attend 1, and renewable term instructors help facilitate them. They also include a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statement as the first under their list of policies, and directly under that is a statement on Accessibility with resources to point students toward OU's Accessibility and Disability Resource Center.

OU's FYC website was incredibly easy to navigate, and I was surprised at the amount of information freely given. I cannot speak to the funding the FYC office receives, or how well its faculty is compensated for their hard work, and I cannot speak to the work conditions at the University of Oklahoma as a GTA or Instructor. The website was clearly developed as a resource tool for FYC faculty and students, but it provided enough general overview of the program to give me an idea of what their curriculum might look like—they even linked their application for the Writing Program of Excellence Award, so I was able to explore sample syllabi, their custom textbook, letters supporting the program, their professional development opportunities, and the program's demographics and contexts it serves. It's worth noting that I've had to fix several typos from OU's website when pulling quotes, so it was not proof-read very well. That in and of itself implies a certain carelessness when it comes to displaying information about their own program, doesn't it? Or, it implies a lack of staffing/funding to do that work. Overall, the program seems to situate itself as vital to student success in future civic engagement, and its curriculum supports that position through encouraging students to examine the importance of values, whether they be

shared, conflicting, or personal, and to defend their positions and values through written and oral assignments designed to increase their communication skills.

### **Colorado State University's Composition Program**

Colorado State University (CSU) is a public land-grant research university in Fort Collins, Colorado. Unlike OU's "Office of First-Year Composition," CSU hosts an entire composition program. The University Composition Program (UCP), as it is coined, houses the first-year composition courses as well as several other lower- and upper-level courses, all of which count toward their dedicated undergraduate major in Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy, and they also offer a Writing, Rhetoric, and Social Change M.A. Although they do not explicitly outline a teaching philosophy, the UCP front page outlines how their "courses, which fulfill the All-University Core Curriculum (AUCC) requirements, prepare students to write, research, and design documents across audiences, genres, and contexts." CSU's curriculum is also shaped by the Colorado Department of Higher Education and their Guaranteed Transfer Pathways models of higher education and composition curriculum. After navigating to the "Program" page, more information about the UCP's goals and values becomes clear. In fact, they clearly outline what we'll see on this page, stating that viewers "will find our program vision and mission statement, our commitment to diversity, and our program policies. We invite you to learn more about the University Composition Program by reading our values below." I think the rhetorical velocity behind such a statement is not something to be ignored, especially because this is one of the first things you see upon navigating to the "Program" page, which is situated directly next to "Home." Clearly stating that

viewers can read UCP's values is powerful and an important reminder of transparency in language, too.

Most disappointing is that we don't find the program's true core values until we scroll down rather far on this page, but they claim that their courses:

“provide students with opportunities to **expand their critical thinking, reading, analysis, and writing abilities**. Each course approaches **writing as a rhetorical act** accomplished through the **effective use of writing processes and strategies**. Students develop their **research, argument, and writing skills**, and use them to **compose texts written for both academic and public audiences**. Our courses focus on **varied writing strategies and situations**: composing for college, writing arguments, writing for the web, writing and style, and writing in the Arts and Humanities, Sciences, Social Sciences and Education.” (bolding added by me)

While they do mention approaching writing as a rhetorical act, they don't have the same emphasis on “rhetorical education” that OU mentioned, nor do they include anything about civic engagement. I see an attempt to include nonacademic genres, but it's not a clear one, so it's not an effective one, either. On the other side of the page, however, they outline how their curriculum “fosters critical curiosity as students develop agility with both academic research and writing and the public discourses that will prepare them for success as university students, professionals, and citizens.” So, again, not a clear attempt at nonacademic genres, but at least now they've outlined their value in seeing students become successful citizens, somewhat similar to OU's value. They also have a diversity statement on that same page, very clearly outlined.

Unfortunately, every single link to the “Composition Requirement” page was broken at the time of this analysis, so there weren’t any details readily available about what students are supposed to achieve in order to graduate. In the FAQ page, there is a question of *why* composition is required, but not explicitly *what* is required. They do have an entire section on how students are placed in CO130 vs. CO150; CO130: Academic Writing is seen as a supplemental, bridge course for students who may need extra support before entering CO150: College Composition, the required course that satisfies the AUCC requirement for intermediate writing, and the second required course in the composition track, CO300: Advanced Composition. These required courses work to follow the All University Common Curriculum developed by CSU. The home page touts that over 6,000 students enroll in the UCP, and it’s easy to assume that the majority of those students are taking CO150 to satisfy their requirement—but the rhetorical choice of including just how many students they serve per semester is an effective one, because it positions itself as a vital organ of the university.

Despite being such a vital organ, the UCP is supported by 40% graduate students and 90% contingent faculty. Upon navigation to the “Faculty” page, it is easy to search by “role” and find that the UCP is supported by 33 listed Graduate Teaching Assistants and 47 listed faculty members, with varying titles from Instructor, Master Instructor, Senior Instructor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, and Adjunct Faculty Member. Only 10 folks hold the title of Professor, Associate Professor, or Assistant professor. It remains uncertain what levels of contingency are truly present within those titles, because even folks that hold those titles may not be tenured or be treated as contract faculty by the university. Once again, funding is unclear, as is how well faculty and GTAs are compensated. There is no information about where classes are held, if

there would be any computer-mediated classrooms, and there is no link to the Writing Center that I have found aside from running into the Writing Center Director titles on the Faculty page. Overall, I was disappointed in the lack of student resources on CSU's UCP website, but I was impressed with their level of explanation and transparency when it came to their goals and values as a program.

### Visually Comparing and Contrasting the Programs

In order to show as clearly as possible the similarities and differences between these two programs, I've provided several illustrations that explore the curriculum and program's demographics.

*Table 3: Comparison of Offered Courses*

Category	OU	CSU
Required Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>English 1113:</b> <b>Principles of English I;</b> satisfies the Symbolic and Oral Communication requirement for general education.</li> <li>• <b>English 1213:</b> <b>Principles of English II;</b> satisfies the Symbolic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Composition 150:</b> <b>College Composition;</b> satisfies the Intermediate Writing 1A, Intermediate Writing (GT-CO2) requirement for the AUCC.</li> <li>• <b>Composition 300:</b> <b>Writing Arguments</b></li> </ul>

	and Oral Communication requirement for general education.	<b>series</b> ; satisfies the Advanced Writing 2, Advanced Writing (GT-CO3) requirement for the AUCC.
Other Composition Offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>English 1913: Writing for the Health Professions.</b> For students in health professions and required by several majors.</li> <li>• <b>English 3153: Technical Writing.</b> For science and engineering students and required by several majors for graduation. Prerequisite: ENGL 1213.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Composition 301A: Writing in the Arts and Humanities</li> <li>• Composition 301B: Writing in the Sciences</li> <li>• Composition 301C: Writing in the Social Sciences</li> <li>• Composition 301D: Writing in Education</li> <li>• Composition 302: Writing in Digital<sup>4</sup> Environments</li> <li>• Composition 401: Writing and Style</li> <li>• Composition 402:</li> </ul>

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<sup>4</sup> Notice how writing for digital environments doesn't appear until students have completed both required composition courses, CO150 and CO30\*. Students may choose any of the CO301 series to complete the requirement as well.

		Principles of Digital Rhetoric and Design
Supplemental Courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English 1013: English for Exchange Students I.</li> <li>English 1023: English for Exchange Students II.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Composition 130: Academic Writing;</b> satisfies the Introductory Writing (GT-CO1) requirement for the AUCC.</li> </ul>

Table 4: Comparison of Composition Instructors

Category	OU	CSU
Number of Instructors	68	80
Types of Instructors	–21 Assistant Teaching Professors –12 Adjunct Faculty Members –35 Graduate Student Instructors	–10 Professors, Associate Professors, or Assistant Professors –33 Graduate Student Instructors –14 Instructors –19 Senior Instructors –4 Master Instructors



Percentage of Contingent Faculty	~70%	???
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Table 5: Comparison of University Demographics

Category	OU	CSU
Size of University	As of Fall 2022: 28,320 total students	As of Fall 2022: 33,361 total students
University Location	Norman, Oklahoma	Fort Collins, Colorado
Student Demographics	Roughly 36.6% students of color	Roughly 30% students of color
Faculty/Staff Demographics	–11,532 employees –1,779 Instructional Faculty ~22.6% Instructional Faculty of Color	–9,794 employees –1,961 Instructional Faculty ~14.5% Instructional Faculty of Color
Carnegie Classification	Public R1	Public R1
Institution Classification	Flagship	Land Grant

Table 6: Comparison of University Resources

Category	OU	CSU
Available Resources on Website	<p><b>For students:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–The Writing Center</li> <li>–Goddard Health Services</li> <li>–OU Accessibility and Disability Resource Center</li> <li>–OU Compass Network</li> <li>–Tutoring</li> <li>–Academic Advising</li> <li>–Student Life</li> <li>–The OWL at Purdue</li> <li>–OU Libraries</li> </ul> <p><b>For instructors:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Center for Teaching Excellence</li> <li>–OU Libraries</li> <li>–Behavior Intervention Team (BIT)</li> <li>–Compass Network</li> <li>–24-Hour Bias Reporting Hotline</li> </ul>	<p>Under the FAQ page, there is a question that asks, “Are there resources that will help me write better and succeed in my composition classes?” to which the answer is, “CSU’s Writing Center is free and offers writing support to all CSU students...”</p> <p>Under a separate question asking “How do I get help with my research?” the answer links several research guides for CO130, CO150, and CO300.</p> <p>Under the Program page, they include links to CSU’s counseling services and mental health awareness</p>

	–FERPA –Human Resources/Payment –Additional Resources/Canvas link	website, as well as Student Case Management for students needing extra support.
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Table 7: Comparison of Visible Pedagogy/Curriculum

Category	OU	CSU
Sample Syllabus Outcomes	<p>Sample syllabus for English 1113 states “By the end of this course, you will be able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use writing for exploration, discovery, comprehension, problem solving, and the construction of nuanced claims</li> <li>• Compose and deliver essays and speeches that demonstrate rhetorical awareness</li> <li>• Engage thoughtfully with other perspectives in a</li> </ul>	<p>Sample syllabus for Composition 150 states “Students should be able to:</p> <p><b>Deepen Rhetorical Knowledge</b></p> <p>a. Focus on rhetorical situation, audience, and purpose.</p> <p>b. Use voice, tone, format, and structure appropriately, deepening understanding of relationships between form and content in writing.</p> <p>c. Write and read texts written in several genres, for specified discourse communities. These</p>

	<p>manner that encourages, rather than curtails, public discussion and participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respond effectively to writing tasks without being given a prescribed organizational form to follow</li> <li>• Develop flexible and effective strategies for organizing, revising, practicing/rehearsing, editing, and proofreading (for grammar and mechanics) to improve development and clarity of ideas</li> <li>• Find, analyze, and correctly cite primary and secondary sources to support and develop personal</li> </ul>	<p>communities may include professional or disciplinary discourse communities.</p> <p><b>Deepen Experience in Writing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Develop recursive strategies for generating ideas, revising, editing, and proofreading for extensive, in-depth, and/or collaborative projects.</li> <li>b. Critique one's own and other's work.</li> <li>c. Practice reflective strategies.</li> </ul> <p><b>Deepen Critical and Creative Thinking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Evaluate the relevance of context.</li> <li>b. Synthesize other points of view within one's own position.</li> <li>c. Reflect on the implications and consequences of the stated conclusion.</li> </ul> <p><b>Use Sources and Evidence</b></p>
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	<p>points of view, understand the views of others, and connect actions to values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyze texts to reveal how writers and speakers make rhetorical choices in the service of an intended purpose or goal</li> <li>Define and practice revision strategies for essays and speeches that locate areas for improvement and effectively target them</li> <li>Develop considerate and constructive strategies for responding to peer work</li> </ul>	<p>a. Select and evaluate appropriate sources and evidence.</p> <p>b. Evaluate the relevance of sources to the research question.</p> <p><b>Deepen Application of Composing Conventions</b></p> <p>a. Apply genre conventions including structure, paragraphing, tone, mechanics, syntax, and style to more extensive or in-depth writing projects.</p> <p>b. Use specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation appropriately.</p>
<p>Sample Assignments:</p> <p>Assignment 1</p>	<p><b>Assignment 1 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“Construct an essay that informs your audience about a value that is important to you, establishes</p>	<p><b>Assignment 1 Prompt:</b> “This personal narrative essay is an opportunity to put your experience in conversation with</p>

	<p>your personal definition of the value, and demonstrates an intricate understanding of how your personal history or experiences have contributed to its creation and evolution.</p> <p>A successful essay will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly identify and define a personal value of importance to you</li> <li>• Use specific details from your personal history, including stories, to explore how this value became important to you, and analyze how the value has evolved in your life</li> <li>• Cite all sources in MLA style</li> <li>• Be at least 1400-1750 words in length</li> </ul>	<p>your peers, while practicing skills useful to academic and creative writing. In this assignment you will practice key skills for success in academic writing such as honoring personal experience, developing content in a story arc, organizing paragraphs, and writing with an audience and purpose in mind, while also developing your story to this audience.</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose one specific experience considering Healthy State’s four pillars of health or another approved topic from in-class brainstorming sessions.</li> <li>• Review the A1 Rubric for specific grading criteria</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be clear, effectively organized, and carefully edited</li> </ul>	<p>and pay attention in class for instruction on how to meet the criteria successfully.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a narrative of 600-900 words (2 1/2 -3 1/2 pages) with MLA formatting: double-spaced, Times New Roman 12-point font, with 1" margins. Narratives are often short, so the word count is designed for the audience's expectations and the genre conventions</li> <li>• An introduction with a thesis that conveys your main point</li> <li>• Throughout your body paragraphs, develop your narrative in detail. Use imagery, dialogue, detail, and description to help</li> </ul>
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		<p>your primary audience</p> <p>visualize the moment as if they were there; show your story, don't just tell it. Use the five senses to help you decide what details to include. Because this is a short narrative, you will need to carefully choose your examples. It might help as you write to ask yourself "what does my audience need to know?" and "does this example/description/etc. help my audience understand my thesis?"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Include reflection: (1) what you were thinking and feeling at that point in time and (2) what you are thinking and feeling now</li> </ul>
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		<p>that you have had time to reflect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A conclusion that moves your audience more deeply into the conversation.</li> </ul>
<p>Sample Assignments:</p> <p>Assignment 2</p>	<p><b>Assignment 2 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“Thoroughly research a local organization and craft an essay that demonstrates how that group’s engagement with a social/political issue enacts or implies a meaningful, shared value.</p> <p>A successful essay will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be informative, detailed, and well-researched</li> <li>• Include a strategic selection of primary and secondary research from</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assignment 2 Prompt:</b></p> <p>The Research Logs are both a tool for researchers to track and synthesize sources, as well as an important part of the inquiry and research process. Each Research Log will follow the conversation model, which reflects the natural inquiry and research process that most professional and academic researchers follow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Log 1: Listening to the Conversation</li> <li>–Log 2: Expanding the Conversation</li> <li>–Log 3: Joining the Conversation</li> </ul>

	<p>credible sources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze a group that is new to you, meaning that you cannot be counted as one of its members</li> <li>• Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the connection between shared values and the way they are put into action</li> <li>• Move beyond surface-level observations to demonstrate a thorough understanding of your subject matter</li> <li>• Cite all sources in MLA style</li> <li>• Be at least 1750-2000 words in length</li> <li>• Be clear, effectively organized, and carefully</li> </ul>	
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	edited”	
<p>Sample</p> <p>Assignments:</p> <p>Assignment 3</p>	<p><b>Assignment 3 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“Explore a text that offers a point of view that differs from your own on a current social or political issue, analyze the values present, and demonstrate how those values shape the author’s argument.</p> <p>A successful essay will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the specific arguments of a chosen text</li> <li>• Focus on the values within the text and present the perspective in a manner that is fair and comprehensive</li> <li>• Include evidence from the text to support your claims</li> <li>• Include primary and secondary research to</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assignment 3 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“In this assignment you will practice writing an academic argument essay using scholarly research to persuade readers. The research, writing, and persuasive skills you learn can be used in your CSU courses, your current jobs, and your future careers. Your purpose is to persuade your audience about an issue relating to health and well-being. You will need to think carefully about the argument you make, what reasons and evidence you use to support your thesis, the audience to whom you’ll write, and how you will appeal to your audience.</p> <p><i>Your researched academic</i></p>

	<p>provide background information about the text itself as well as the complexity of the social or political issue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid arguing for or against a point of view</li> <li>• Cite all sources in MLA style</li> <li>• Be at least 1500-1750 words in length</li> <li>• Be clear, effectively organized, and carefully edited</li> </ul>	<p><i>argument should include the following:</i></p> <p>–Write an academic argument essay of 1200-1500 word (5-6 pages, not including the Works Cited page), double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 point font, 1” margins, and MLA formatting. While academic argument essays vary in length, this assignment’s word count is designed to give you room to develop your argument while considering genre conventions and audience expectations. Use appropriate rhetorical appeals to persuade your audience.</p> <p>–An introduction with a thesis-driven argument based on your purpose.</p> <p>Throughout your body paragraphs:</p> <p>–Develop focused body</p>
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		<p>paragraphs with topic sentences.</p> <p>Body paragraphs should include logical reasons and credible evidence that further the thesis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Include at least 4 sources, both popular and scholarly, that offer varying perspectives and are synthesized appropriately.</li> <li>–Address at least one established concern or objection.</li> <li>–Paraphrase, quote, and explain source material appropriately for your specific audience.</li> <li>–A conclusion that does more than summarize your argument.</li> </ul>
<p>Sample Assignments:</p> <p>Assignment 4</p>	<p><b>Assignment 4 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“Give a 5-7 minute speech designed to inform your classmates about an aspect of your work, your classmates’ work, or a class concept that was</p>	<p><b>Assignment 4 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“This assignment focuses on learning how to persuade a stakeholder to take a specific action within the local community. This assignment also</p>

	<p>particularly meaningful to you.</p> <p>A successful speech will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be clearly prepared, drawing on a working outline</li> <li>• Inform your classmates about an aspect of your work, your classmates' work, or a class concept that was particularly meaningful to you and explain why it was meaningful to you</li> <li>• Demonstrate purposeful rhetorical decisions in the organization and delivery that guide the audience's experience of the speech</li> <li>• Integrate compelling examples from this</li> </ul>	<p>teaches you a new genre—either an action proposal or an advocacy infographic—and how to compose and design a document according to the genre conventions. In this unit, you will learn to identify a specific, local problem at CSU that is related to your A3 topic and develop a solution that your stakeholder can use, if they are so persuaded, to solve the problem. You will also learn to explain why the problem is exigent to the stakeholder and advocate for a new, specific solution. Since writers frequently adapt their writing for different genres and audiences, this assignment gives you practice with skills you will use in other classes, your workplace, and your life.”</p>
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	<p>semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Account for the expectations of your intended audience</li> <li>• Be 5-7 minutes in length</li> <li>• Be clear, effectively organized, and (in the case of the outline) carefully edited”</li> </ul>	Both genres have different requirements.
<p>Sample Assignments: Assignment 5</p>	N/A	<p><b>Assignment 5 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“Throughout the semester you have practiced metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” before, during, and after the writing process. In this portfolio assignment, you will practice semester-long metacognition by reflecting across your CO150 experience. Metacognition is a critical skill for all of us; it teaches us to think about and explain what we are learning. In</p>

		<p>the workplace, employees use metacognition in their annual reviews to explain how they have improved as employees. This assignment is an opportunity to learn more about yourself, what you learned in CO150, and the ways you can carry those skills and practices into your future work.”</p> <p>Includes both reflection letter and revision plan and an optional revision of an earlier assignment.</p>
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### **Assignment Design Comparative Analysis**

It is of vital importance that I note that neither syllabus addressed digital media literacies in their student learning outcomes. OU’s outcomes focus far more on students developing into responsible civic participants, which feels like it lends itself nicely to digital and media literacies, except the assignments don’t ask students to interact with media, and while the prompts are more open-ended and say “craft an essay” instead of naming explicit genres like CSU does, they don’t necessarily imply or encourage multimodal work, as it is still inherently limited to an “essay” genre. It is interesting that OU’s curriculum incorporates oral rhetorics like speeches and CSU’s doesn’t. Both



universities offer a general lower-level public speaking course to fulfill that common core requirement, but OU has incorporated elements of both into its composition course. Both programs emphasize the use of sources and evidence as a learning outcome, but neither acknowledge the underlying digital literacy skills necessary for completing those learning outcomes. The fact is, we shouldn't mention outcomes and skills without mentioning the literacies that enable them, and many of the listed student learning outcomes clearly assume that students enter the classroom having developed into completely digitally and media literate scholars, because it sure isn't addressed in the curriculum.

The assignment prompts explicitly demonstrate the work students are doing in each class and the components they will be assessed on. Comparing them is fruitful, because we can see striking similarities and differences that illuminate the key functions of each curriculum. For the first assignment, we already see a shared value in placing emphasis on developing student voice and identity in the classroom. OU asks students to explore a value they have and how it has shaped them; CSU asks students to explore a personal experience and how that has shaped them. It is clear that both assignments seek to help students settle into the writing classroom, but OU's assignment is nearly double the length of CSU's assignment, which implies a certain expectation from OU's students, despite the fact that English 1113 actually lines up more directly with Composition 130, CSU's course that fulfills the GT-Co1 requirement for AUCC. With that positioning, Composition 150 should have slightly more demanding assignments, right? That appears to be the opposite of what has happened here. Already, OU's first assignment is longer than anything we ask our students to write at CSU, with our highest word maximum at 1500 words.

Though both programs transition into research for Assignment 2, OU's asks students to explicitly engage with a local group/community and learn about their values and goals, whereas CSU's remains as open-ended as it can within the health course theme. The goals of the two units are different, as well: OU's end assignment is another essay of even longer length, yet CSU's end goal is three separate research logs that help students engage in the scholarly conversation surrounding their chosen issue. However, neither assignment acknowledges the skills necessary for conducting this research; how are students at OU supposed to identify and communicate with this local community, and how are CSU students supposed to navigate an entire world's worth of research to condense into three little logs? OU's syllabus provides a glimpse into how they plan to scaffold their learning, and they do provide lessons on interviewing techniques, analyzing values from texts, and synthesis, but they don't acknowledge online research. CSU's assignment prompt for the research log does directly mention the CSU library database, and the lesson scaffolding includes library database instruction, BOOLEAN search terms, and the acknowledgement of both scholarly and popular sources. It is clear that the research goals of each unit are vastly different, as well.

For Assignment 3, OU asks students to examine a text that demonstrates an opinion or value that they do not share in order to analyze the values present and explore how they shape that author's argument. This is a highly rhetorical approach, one based much more on the analysis of a text than a student's own argument. In contrast, CSU asks students to build off the research from Assignment 2 and produce their own rhetorically-situated argument. However, we can see how the course outcomes are shaping the direction these assignments take. OU has the specific goal of trying to get students to interact with diverse values and opinions to prepare them to be respectful

and responsible participants in civil discourse; CSU is simply trying to produce student writers equipped to handle various contexts, and don't emphasize one context over another (or so they say; their assignments imply otherwise, given the highly academic-genre nature of them). Assignment 4 is an interesting comparison because both assignments are an informative argument genre, but they are drastically different assignments. OU asks students to craft a speech to inform their classmates of something of a personal nature, whereas CSU asks students to identify a local stakeholder and propose a solution to an issue. This is where CSU mildly attempts to bring in digital and media literacies without actually really acknowledging it: both a proposal and an infographic require graphic design skills that are a combination of digital and media literacies, and yet the only scaffolding students receive on that front is one single reading about design principles; nothing on the actual steps they should take to approach this assignment. If digital and media literacies were overtly discussed in the curriculum, more scaffolding might help students access the literacies of this assignment quicker and easier. Assignment 4 is OU's final project, but CSU includes an Assignment 5, where students are asked to engage in metacognition and reflect across their experiences in their composition course but also as a student during that semester, along with a revision plan for one of their major assignments.

## **Conclusion**

OU's Office of FYC is situated as an independent office, and it primarily includes only first-year/lower-division English/Principles of Composition classes. CSU's UCP is housed under the Department of English and has a full major and master's degree dedicated to composition. Based on appearance alone, as well as different rhetorical

choices made by each website, it is easy to assume that CSU's UCP is more funded, more recognized, and more valued than OU's Office of FYC, despite OU winning an award from CCCC. Both programs require the completion of two composition courses to fulfill their common core requirements. Unfortunately, digital writing as an instructional topic doesn't enter CSU's composition curriculum until the 300 level, and OU's doesn't seem to incorporate it at all. OU's program places far more emphasis on civic engagement and public rhetorics, including asking students to write an entire project about an opinion different from their own. OU focuses on writing and speaking assignments, with emphasis on preparing students to communicate in the public sphere and become respectful and capable participants in civil discourse. CSU's program places far more emphasis on the modal, genre-based writing assignments, and primarily asks students to analyze and interpret research in order to produce writing. Instead of asking students to produce new texts, CSU focuses on students interpreting certain texts to produce an argument. While OU's composition curriculum seems to allow students the opportunity to engage in multiple topics and genres, CSU's program seems more limited, restricted by a course theme and a modal-based assignment design. CSU's program does offer elements of graphic design in Assignment 4, though, which is the closest to directly engaging with digital and media literacy we see between these two programs.

Most notably lacking in both first-year composition curricula is any overt mention of digital or media literacies, despite the fact that both have designed learning outcomes and assignments that hinge on students being digitally and media literate in order to fully and successfully complete them. This is the opposite of the typical deficit-model approach we see many composition instructors place on their students where they assume students enter their classrooms inherently lacking in skills and literacies;

with technology, instructors are quick to acknowledge that young, digitally-savvy students bring new literacies to the table, but we aren't as quick to learn those literacies ourselves, or more importantly, accurately and thoughtfully incorporate them into our curricula. Composition instructors can fall into the trap of having assumed that their students are more digitally literate just because of their generation, but in fact, many of my students still struggle to work in Canvas and Google Docs, even as they run circles around me navigating Reddit. It is important to respect the literacies our students come in with, but it is equally important to include those literacies in our curricula to ensure all students have equal access and opportunity to develop those literacies.

## CHAPTER 4: A MIXED-METHODS AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF FYC CURRICULUM

In this chapter, I seek to explore the question of “How do students and instructors experience digital media literacies in our Composition 150 curriculum at CSU?” To do so, I employ a mix of analytic and evocative autoethnography to reflect on five moments throughout my first-year composition teaching career. This data is important to this project and to the composition field because it exhibits real-life moments and scenarios that happen in a first-year composition classroom, and having direct access to an instructor’s experiences and perceptions of student engagement proves the exigency for the framework changes I suggest in Chapter 5.

### **Autoethnographic Data**

Despite how these program websites describe themselves and their service to students, speaking as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in CSU’s composition program I can say that we still aren’t quite meeting students’ needs. We already see the gap between the skills students are expected to have when they enter the classroom and the skills they are expected to have when they leave it; in many ways, we assume that our students have the functional, rhetorical, and critical literacies necessary to develop the skills we’ve outlined, but that’s not always the case. Many of my students struggle with the assignments that require the most digital and media literacies, despite the fact that I would consider them to be highly multiliterate. I have decided to include autoethnographic methods of reporting my experiences as a first-year composition instructor because I believe the narrative that my students and I create about our

classrooms and curricula is a valuable learning tool. First-year composition occupies a precarious role, it's true; between the variation of education standards and student abilities, it's impossible to design a curriculum that isn't somehow letting some students down. There will always be a bell curve, and we will always be chasing pedagogy that truly meets ALL students where they are. However, I believe one way to address that whirlwind is to talk with our students about the curriculum, like where they find themselves struggling to connect with the material or opportunities they wish they would've had in their first-year composition class. I've learned a lot by holding individual conferences with my students where we discuss their current assignments, other classes, social life, and what they are enjoying about our course. I recognize that few composition instructors have the time or space to host individual conferences with all of their students, but I've found alternative methods to save time and effort. One of those methods is to encourage students to come to my office hours to have a conversation about how the class is going, and in exchange, I'll offer them direct, in the moment feedback on something they're working on for another class. I would be hosting office hours anyway, and that time is dedicated to my CO150 preparation and grading, so it isn't a drain on my time outside of my course load. Whatever way an instructor chooses to engage in conversation with their students, it's important that it happens.

The content I've gathered over the last two years teaching six different CO150: College Composition courses and conversing with students has lit a fire within me, and inspired this thesis to argue for a change in curriculum design I believe future students will heavily benefit from: the inclusion of digital and media literacies. To show how our curriculum does and does not engage with these literacies, I have chosen four moments from the past two years that highlight the exigency and necessity for the inclusion of

digital and media literacies and practices into first-year composition curriculum. I've included them as storied vignettes to honor the evocative autoethnographic method of reporting data, and I will then analyze and identify what we stand to gain from these stories to honor the analytic autoethnographic method of reporting data.

### *Johnny is Sick of the Bullshit*

The first week of September 2021 was my third week of teaching first-year composition...ever. To date, the class of CO150 I taught that semester is still the liveliest, most outspoken group of students I've had. Our classroom was settled within a cluster of classrooms on the ground level of our football stadium. The only windows in the fully interior room lined the doors at the back of the space; there were no distractions to be had in that room, as all the students were oriented so that their backs faced the doors and windows and any opportunity to look at anything that wasn't inside the classroom. It was a large, wide space with maybe 40 single desks with rolling chairs attached, but the students all clustered in the middle. Our classroom, based on the way my students sat, could've only been 20 feet wide. But they chose to sit close to each other right off the bat, and I knew we could build a special community.

The students that sat at the front of the classroom and closest to my lectern were the most enthusiastic about participation, conversation with me, and clarification questions. One student, Johnny<sup>5</sup> really took the brunt of class discussions and group activities. He was constantly volunteering to answer questions I posed to the classroom, and he dominated group discussions, especially in the beginning of the semester when I

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<sup>5</sup> In an effort to preserve and protect students' identity, students' names in this thesis have been replaced with pseudonyms.



hadn't yet learned how to help students find a better balance. The work he turned in was always well-done and on track with our curriculum, but it was clear that he was bored, because it always lacked clear passion or enthusiasm for what he was learning or working on. In class, he was a lively, energetic, and charismatic presence, always eager to discuss and engage with activities, but that never showed in his process work. His work read like it was written by an exhausted AI bot—it was flat, it hit only the bare minimums, and none of his very strong voice showed through. I had suspected that he was the type of student who enjoyed in-class time but struggled with staying engaged outside of class, but that didn't totally track, because he always turned in his work on time and with clear consideration for the assignment. Eventually, in the third week of our curriculum and after the 11th class we'd had together, Johnny and I were the slowest to leave the classroom that day.

“Okay, I have a question for you, and I don't really mean it disrespectfully to you,” Johnny said suddenly. He had almost left the classroom, but suddenly spun around when he said it, clutching his backpack in one hand and his skateboard in the other with white-knuckled intensity. He had a deer-in-headlights expression, like he hadn't fully expected himself to start this conversation.

I shot him what I hoped was a warm smile and said, “Sure, Johnny, what's up?”

Johnny shuffled his feet once, picked at the plaid red pajama pants he wore that day, then looked me right in the eye and asked, “When is it gonna start feeling less like elementary school in here?”

Now it was my turn to feel like a deer in headlights. I was absolutely flabbergasted, and my expression had to have communicated that. I'm pretty sure I made Johnny feel bad because he immediately tried to backpedal with, “I mean, I just

feel like I've learned all this stuff before. Are we going to get to anything new or exciting or stuff that actually matters to us?"

At this point the air had completely left my lungs. There was just no way I could handle this conversation; I had absolutely no idea how to respond. In fact, I don't even remember what I said, because I blacked out for the rest of that conversation. I know Johnny didn't have any malicious intent, but his comment left me severely shaken. I felt conflicted; up until that point, I had believed in the curriculum and what I was teaching. Did that make me an ignorant, obtuse instructor? Was I not noticing the needs of my students as closely as I should? I had sensed that Johnny wasn't connecting with his work, but I had no idea he felt that it reminded him of *elementary school*. It's a harsh statement to make to a college instructor, but ultimately, Johnny's comment was the first push toward my critical examination of the curriculum I was teaching, how it served me and my students, and ultimately, toward this thesis.

### *Sally Wants a New Genre*

In my second semester teaching first-year composition, I was feeling more confident navigating the curriculum I had been given and helping my students see how the knowledge and skills they develop in our class can be transferred to other situations. When it came time for our last major assignment before their final portfolio, I felt very comfortable with my students and we had developed a trusting and communicative community inside our classroom. When I introduced the A4: Advocacy Infographic or Proposal assignment, many students seemed excited for the opportunity to tap into their visual and creative skills, but all of my students were intrigued by the prospect of writing for advocacy; that is, the assignment asked students to identify an issue, identify an

audience that can solve that issue, and propose a plan for a solution to that issue. Many students chose issues right on campus, or in their hometowns, and others chose issues that were geographically nowhere near us.

One student, Sally, was incredibly excited to take the issue she had researched and written about in our previous major assignment and remediate it into a new genre, an infographic, for a new purpose. However, when it became clear that the goal of the assignment was to identify a physical location to post, Sally was upset. Immediately after I said that guideline, Sally raised her hand.

“How come it has to be a physical place?” she asked.

I responded with, “Our goal here is for you to identify a narrow, specific audience, like one person, one organization, or one physical location, so that you can rhetorically tailor your argument for that audience.”

Sally scrunched up her nose and said, “Okay, but what if I have a specific audience in mind but it’s not a physical place?”

“What’s your idea?” I shifted my weight back and forth and glanced at the clock; it was a packed lesson plan and this felt like an after-class question.

“Well, I would like for a certain page to post it on their Instagram.”

If there was a soundtrack playing in the background during this conversation, this is where the record scratch would be.

“Hmm,” was all I said for a moment. I held up a finger and looked up to the ceiling and took 5 seconds to pray to the composition gods and ask them for guidance. Then I did my best to answer her question.

“Well, I think at that point, you’re talking about a different genre. An infographic is more of a poster meant to be physically displayed or distributed in public,” I said carefully.

“But I see infographics posted to Instagram all the time,” Sally shot back immediately. At this point, several students nodded along with her, and I knew I needed to tread carefully, or we could all leave that classroom confused and a little irritated.

“Many of the genre conventions overlap between an Instagram slideshow deck and an infographic poster. They may look similar, but if we think of the rhetorical situation, we can tease out some of the differences between the two genres. Can anyone shout out some differences, aside from physical vs. digital, between an Instagram slide deck and an infographic poster?”

I felt good about that response, and so did my students, because immediately several hands shot up.

One student said, “Infographic audiences have less time.”

“Say more, elaborate for us,” I replied.

They said, “If it’s in a physical place, you’re competing with whatever the person is doing to have them in that space. If it’s on Instagram, the person probably wants to spend their time there.”

“YES!” I yelled. “What else?”

Another student said, “One is in one piece and one requires scrolling to see the other information.”

“Excellent point. The information you choose and where you choose to place it matters a lot for both genres! But one is designed differently than the other,” I replied.

Another student raised their hand and said, “What about the purpose? An infographic can only do so much but you can get people to click a link in your Instagram bio.”

The first student shot back, “That’s not true. An infographic can have a QR code to scan.”

“How do you make your own QR code?” asked another student.

It was time for me to step back in. “The purpose is always important to think about. There are arguments better served by an Instagram post, and there are those that work better in an infographic. There are certainly both similarities and differences between the two genres, but we’re focusing on infographics for this assignment.”

I could feel the level of furrowed my brows were, and I quickly tried to make a neutral face, but the fact was, I was already beginning to question my own defense of the curriculum. I moved toward my computer to signal that we were moving on, but Sally tentatively raised her hand again and asked, “But what if my argument is better served by an Instagram post? Can I do that genre instead?”

Several students once again nodded and looked at me hopefully. Because this was only my second semester, and despite the confidence I felt in navigating the curriculum, I was hesitant to switch things up right in that moment. I don’t always love living by the “ask for forgiveness instead of permission” motto, and I didn’t want to step on any toes, so I ultimately told my students that we were going to stick to the infographic poster genre because that’s what the curriculum called for. It’s a move I don’t necessarily regret, but it has stuck with me, because it was another moment where my students showed me that what I was giving them and what our composition faculty was giving them wasn’t necessarily meeting their needs or desires. It was also the first time a

student had directly challenged our curriculum with a really valid claim: why shouldn't they have free reign over the genres they choose? Isn't the entire point of the rhetorical triangle image to help writers see how context, purpose, audience, and author literally shape the text? By assigning a genre right off the bat, we eliminate our student's total agency over their own rhetorical situation. Furthermore, who are we to assign priority to a genre like an infographic poster over a genre like an Instagram slide deck? I wish I'd given her the opportunity to explore the genre that felt most right for her argument, to explore digital and media literacies in a direct way. I very much attribute my choice here to my position as a first-year GTA, scared to misstep and lose funding I'm not even contractually guaranteed. Despite how much I wanted to make a change, I didn't feel like taking the risk or accidentally wielding an authority I don't really have.

This assignment has the potential for students to engage with digital and media literacies; composing an infographic or a proposal includes multimodal work like graphic design, research, and understanding the rhetorical situation of these genres asks students to engage in critical digital and media literacies. However, unless the instructor knows to clearly define and outline those skills and literacies, students simply don't know they have the opportunity to develop those practices. For example, in my first semester teaching this assignment, I didn't talk to my students about digital or media literacies, and instead chose not to stray from the curriculum given to me. The A4 assignments I received were lacking in creativity, design principles, understanding of visual arguments, and overall, it was clear students didn't know why they were wasting their time with these genres. It wasn't until the third semester when I began to emphasize that this assignment was an opportunity for students to think deeply about visuals, media in arguments, the skills that come along with knowing how to design a

poster on a computer; I was able to lay down what digital and media literacies looked like in practice, and in turn, my students connected more with their work. I was so impressed with the work they turned in that semester. It showed clear excitement about their work, and many students told me that they ended up using their infographics or proposals for things outside our classroom. Lauren, who will be featured in the next entry, chose to post her infographic throughout her dorm building to inform her fellow first-year students of proper crosswalk etiquette. And dare I say it: pedestrian traffic etiquette improved like 10% after that. In her reflection, she wrote that her ability to visually argue and convince her audience to make a change was fully attributed to her experience developing digital and media literacy skills both inside and outside our classroom.

### *Polly Hates Limitations, but Lauren Loves Them*

In my third semester teaching first-year composition, my students and I hit a rhythm that was hard to ignore. I had been given a new curriculum this year, and my students and I found that it was easier to drop into the flow of the semester full of research with the introduction of a new unit dedicated to producing research logs. However, a new stipulation came with the research this year: it was to be centered around and dedicated to our college campus. When it came to the major writing assignments, both A3: Researched Academic Argument and A4: Advocacy Infographic or Proposal, the audiences had to be local and specific to our campus, and it was encouraged that the issues were too.

Some of my students absolutely loved this. They jumped at the opportunity to learn how to address issues on campus and work toward solving those issues through

their research and writing. One student, Lauren, was really excited that the assignment specified an audience on our campus. She decided for our unit 4 that she would create an infographic addressing an issue she constantly faced on campus: bad crosswalk etiquette. Because she was so familiar with the issue and the audience, she completed the assignment easily and received an A.

However, some students fought back against this requirement. Many students were eager to engage in advocacy work, but didn't want to be limited to a specific local and geographical context. Students who didn't grow up in our area often wanted to address issues that were closer to their homes. Others wanted to research topics related to their majors or other interests, and couldn't find an audience at our college that would fulfill the "has the power to implement the change you propose" requirement for choosing an appropriate audience. Polly, a serious and dedicated student interested in conservation efforts, really wanted to write about the pollution in Lagos Bay in Nigeria. When she came to a conference with me about who her audience might be, we struggled to identify someone on our campus who could affect the changes she wanted to see.

Ultimately, I decided to lift the local, campus-specific requirement, because too many students were excited about issues that had nothing to do with our campus. And truthfully, as long as they were choosing a local and specific audience for their issue, they were still fulfilling the requirements of the assignment and our course outcomes. I can see how a move to localize our students' research can be a successful one, as it was for Lauren, but the majority of my students found it limiting and frustrating, and inquiry and research should never feel like that. The last thing I want to do is stunt student interest in their research and issue because of a limiting theme or requirement.



## *Cory vs. Course Themes*

On that same note, for the two years I've been at this university working with this curriculum, we've operated under a "Healthy State" theme, with a CSU custom textbook titled "Healthy State" that includes articles that fall under the four pillars of health: mental, physical, community, and environmental (*Healthy State*). The curriculum encourages students to engage in the course theme; students are asked to brainstorm topics related to the four pillars of health for each assignment, and the provided reading materials and sample assignments are all centered around health-related topics. Many of the readings contained information on healthy eating, on maintaining a "healthy state," and what a "healthy state" really means. The readings under environmental and community health were really interesting and piqued my student's interest, but so did the topics under physical and mental health. In my first semester teaching this curriculum, I was already feeling extremely wary about the theme. I can still vividly remember the moment I opened the email from our composition faculty and saw the attachment labeled "Healthy-State-Reader" and nearly vomited. I'd had no idea our curriculum followed a theme, let alone a theme based on health. Considering my positionality as a fat and disabled student instructor, I felt extremely unqualified and extra visible to my students. How was I supposed to teach a "healthy state" theme when I'd never existed in a "healthy state" in my life? Once my students started to choose topics, and several chose obesity rates and diet tricks, I wondered if they were propelled toward such topics because I was their instructor, and I was visibly not in a so-called "healthy state." I have struggled navigating this curriculum for the past two years, and I have lots of thoughts about the choosing of course themes and what is allowable, but those thoughts will come in Chapter 5.

Since many of my students were in health-related majors, they took the opportunity to explore issues within the topics they were already interested in; other students were excited at the opportunity to explore new information. However, Cory, a first-year student who would not complete the work unless he cared about it, was quite pissed. Cory was a construction management major, and Cory wanted to write about best practices in construction management. When he first approached me about a topic that didn't necessarily fit like a glove with the course theme, I was hesitant to let him branch out. I asked if he'd rather try to find something that related to our theme since our readings and textbook would be more useful to him that way, but he adamantly refused.

In one of the most exhausted, angry tones a student has ever used with me, Cory said, "Listen Ms. Wigginton, I don't really care at all about the textbook or our course theme, I just want to write about construction management. It's what I care about, it's what I want to research, and if I can't write about that, I might as well drop the class."

I blinked, nodded, and took a moment to digest, and then replied, "Well, that's not necessary, Cory. You can explore and write about anything you'd like in this class, so long as it doesn't violate our community guidelines."

This was the first instance of a student vocalizing how they'd rather withdraw from a course than suffer through writing they didn't enjoy, and since then, I've almost completely abandoned the course theme. Some students still choose to engage with health-related topics, but it's because they *want* to, not because they *have* to. Now, they lament to me how other classes have such strict prompts, but they quickly add that they love to come to my class and learn to write about the things they actually care about. I'm incredibly glad I made that choice, because the work my students have submitted over

the years has been nothing short of fascinating and excellent. Students are writing about supply chain issues, sustainable fashion, and social media's effects on mental health, but they are also writing about the influence of Christianity on folklore, the validity of mission trips, the use of technology in classrooms, and many other issues not so closely related to health. Students have told me in class that they are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to choose the issues they explore; when students have agency in their writing, it shows up in their passionate and well-researched work!

### *Taylor's Tweets*

In my fourth and final semester teaching CO150 at CSU, I am certainly at my most confident, both within the curriculum and with my students. My students are turning in amazing, informed work that has me hopeful for the future, and it's all because I started incorporating certain aspects of digital and media literacies into our activities and assignments. During our second unit, which is entirely dedicated to research, my students often come to me with questions like *What counts as a popular source?* and *How do I find sources that come directly from my audience?* I answered them with one simple statement that had them all absolutely losing their minds: *research can be anything you need it to be*. One student, Taylor, was particularly flabbergasted by this insight and immediately raised her hand.

"Okay, wait, what does 'anything' mean though? Because it can't truly be 'anything,' right?" she asked, her fingers curled in air quotes around 'anything.'

"It means that the best sources are the ones that are credible, but also help to convince your audience the most. And that a source can be literally 'anything', so long as it meets that criteria."

Taylor took a moment, her eyes pointed at the ceiling, before she replied, “So, if my audience is Gen Z, can I use a Tweet to capture their attention?”

“YES!” I practically yelled. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Tiktoks, Tweets, Reddit threads, Instagram or Facebook posts, Youtube videos, blogs, a photograph or a song...the list is endless for what you could find online or elsewhere to help convince your audience of your argument, or to provide evidence for a claim. Don’t feel limited based on what you’ve been told is ‘appropriate’ or ‘proper’ for research—good research engages all types of voices and genres!”

My students had started to smile at that point, and I could practically see the gears in their heads turning at lightning speed. Almost all of my students, at some point or another during the research process, confided that they had never cited anything but a trusted government website page or scholarly article because they had been told that was the only type of evidence available or appropriate for academic writing. In every single one of those conversations, I made sure I told my students that the digital world has changed the way we research, and popular/social media is a great place to look for evidence to support our claims, especially if we’re trying to convince a more digitally-adjusted audience like Millennials or Gen Z. Finally, I told them that digital literacy and media literacy are things they should search wherever they like to look for information, because they would benefit a whole lot from a general understanding of those literacies and the practices associated with them, including how best to navigate research in digital media environments.

## **What We Stand to Learn**

We stand to gain much knowledge from exploring and analyzing these five moments from my teaching career here at CSU. However, I want to place the most emphasis on what we can learn about student agency, digital and media literacies, and themed composition courses.

### *Student Agency*

The responses I've received over the past two years teaching college composition indicate a larger problem within composition curriculum: our students find it lacking! Many of our composition mentors here at CSU have stated that, though students complain that they are "above" the coursework or more advanced than the curriculum assumes, they aren't always able to put their money where their mouth is. That is, students may complain that the curriculum feels too "elementary," but the fact is, students aren't performing at the higher levels they think they occupy. This has always been an interesting phenomenon to me, because why would students feel patronized if they didn't actually know the information? Is their lack of meeting rubric requirements proof that they don't know the information, or is it proof of something else? My thesis, nor my brain, has the space to delve into all *that*, but I do find it interesting. Could it indicate that students have moved on, and our rubrics and requirements need to be re-examined? Perhaps. I think it is a mistake to write off our students' experiences and struggles with our curriculum based on their performance within it. Instead, I hope to look at their experiences as an opportunity for progress and responding to their needs in sustainable ways.

I wholeheartedly believe in my students, and I do my best to avoid the deficit model that shapes many of the perspectives of my peers and colleagues. My urgent avoidance of this perspective shapes much of what happens within my classroom. I've been reflecting a lot on what it means to remediate/remix arguments into different mediums/genres than which they originally existed in. This has mostly been prompted by my rediscovery of Frou Frou's cover of "Holding Out For A Hero" from Shrek 2, and I felt like that was necessary context, so you could also enjoy the groovy remix of a classic. I like to believe that when my students and I enter my classroom, we're also engaging in a groovy remix of a classic--instead of more traditional methods of composition instruction, my classroom is more of a democracy. We talk about the curriculum together and critically examine how it serves them and how it doesn't. My students engage in the most discussion when I allow them the agency to tell me what they wish they were learning, what they thought was the most and least helpful activity of the week, and where their opinions lie on certain issues. As literacy education professor Margarat Vaughn writes, "In classrooms where student agency flourishes, teachers possess a vision of students as knowledge generators and individuals who can develop the skills of problem-solvers and advanced thinkers" (115). I prioritize believing my students when they tell me the curriculum isn't serving their current needs. I don't necessarily think it wise to recommend that all composition instructors engage in semester-long, continuous design that would inevitably leave them exhausted and even more overworked and underpaid. However, incorporating the practice of reflection on the curriculum into the everyday class activities gives students more opportunities to exhibit their agency. The stories I provided explicitly show that students enjoy

exercising agency, and enjoy knowing that they have plenty of it to work with throughout the semester.

### *Students Need Digital and Media Literacies*

If our Unit 4 assignment didn't call for graphic design principles, there would be basically no acknowledgement of digital or media literacies in my first-year composition curriculum, despite the fact that my students are more than ready for learning and practicing those literacies in nonacademic genres. In Sally's case, she wished she could engage in social media genres that might better reach her particular audience and suit her particular purpose. In Taylor's case, she had never even considered looking anywhere but the library databases for information about her issue, despite the fact that she had seen Tweets that would help her make her argument. Lauren even wrote in her reflection for her infographic poster that it would have been a lot harder had she not had previous design experience and time learning how to navigate online design tools, because nothing in our coursework prepares students for doing so beside one reading that outlines four design principles: contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity. In fact, Sam's was the most well-designed of the whole class, and noticeably so. When we ask students to engage in practices we don't adequately equip them for, we quite literally set them up to fail, and our Assignment 4 does just that.

First-year composition curriculum needs to prioritize educating students by helping them develop and practice the multiliteracies that are required for daily living; design principles, but other knowledge, such as ability to understand the how and why something is designed, is equally important. As Overstreet notes,

“In practical terms, this is achieved when students make an object of critical inquiry out of their relationship with tools and the degree to which that

relationship corresponds with their needs, interests and values. Knowledge about systems and processes and how information is ‘structured, promoted, and commodified’ can grow out of such inquiry” (58).

Employing Selber’s functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies in a classroom is only effective if they are centered around the student experience, and currently, the student experience is dominated by digital media and digital rhetoric. By focusing on developing digital and media literacy practices, students are better prepared for all types of research, writing, and communication.

### *The Themed Composition Course*

Many composition and writing studies scholars have argued against the inclusion of a theme into a writing course. In fact, prominent scholar Linda Adler-Kassner has famously said, “Writing classes, especially first year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always be about the study of writing. They should not, as I heard recently and anecdotally, engage students in writing about vampires—nor about political issues, nor about recent controversies, nor about other things that are not about *writing*.” Many scholars agree with her, and stick to a curriculum that asks students to write about writing, literacies, and writing studies, and students are not allowed to explore the random topics they may be interested in outside of writing studies.

Despite the evidence that themed composition courses aren’t what they’re all cracked up to be, “vampires” in a composition class can still be a good thing. There are certain scenarios in which themed first-year composition courses succeeded in engaging its students in both their writing and the topic at hand. For example, in her article “A



Wellness-Centered Approach to First-Year Composition: Curriculum Design and Course Management Strategies for Promoting Students' Rhetorical Knowledge and Personal Self-Awareness," author Mary K. Assad discusses how a wellness-centered approach supports academic and personal development, and despite the challenges developing such a course presents, "careful curricular planning...can open up new avenues for student learning and growth" (12). However, Assad did not address the potential of how triggering a health theme could be for certain instructors and students. Many first-year composition instructors attempt to reflect on their own themed courses like Assad did, but few have found their themes to be particularly problematic. In her article "Engaging in a University Curriculum Involving Sustainability Themes: A Two-Year Case Study of a First-year Writing Course," author Tara Hembrough problematizes the use of course themes and struggles with place-related themes before diving into her case study results. Hembrough ends with a discussion on how, though incorporating sustainability topics can be difficult, "the incorporation of nature themes and place-based values into Composition I succeeded in improving most students' reading, writing, and thinking processes" (244). In fact, many scholars argue that the best way to teach writing is by allowing students to bring "vampires," or content that isn't related to writing, into the classroom. In "This Way for Vampires: Teaching First-Year Composition in 'Challenging Times,'" author Sandy Friedman argues for the importance of student-chosen content in composition courses because it might be one of the only times they can explore topics that interest them. Friedman argues that including "vampires" is crucial in the "challenging times" we're facing, especially for intellectual curiosity and student engagement. In order to move forward as a field, we must collectively define what an appropriate theme looks like, and how best to approach a theme in a first-year

composition course. Of course, we may never unanimously come to the same conclusion, but we can at least learn from what we've done in the past, and move forward with a new framework for "vampires" in mind. In fact, I have one for us in the next chapter!

## CHAPTER 5: A FANDOM FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I offer a potential new framework for first-year composition pedagogy that engages fandom as a tool for teaching critical digital and media literacies. I aim to demonstrate what a possible fandom framework curriculum might look like, and provide examples of assignments that can be used to incorporate the multiliteracies that fandom can offer students. What I hope to offer is a peek into what a future using fandom to teach critical digital and media literacies looks like.

### **A Note on Power, Professional Development, and Conditions of Labor**

I want to begin my discussion of a new pedagogical framework by acknowledging the tensions that arise when introducing any new curriculum and emphasizing a bottom-up approach when designing it. We find ourselves asking a lot of questions when it comes to designing and implementing new curriculums: *Who has the expertise to design curriculum? Who has the power to introduce professional development to address the curricular changes? Who has the least agency? Who has the most control? How do we stay current and consistent at the same time? How do we address the administrative and instructional barriers that come along with new curriculums?* I am attempting to address some of these questions that have plagued the curriculum design field. I and many other GTAs have the expertise to design curriculum because we work directly with it on a daily basis, and students often feel more comfortable approaching us with their struggles regarding the curriculum, so we see first-hand how certain changes could impact student learning. While GTAs don't necessarily have the power to implement new professional development to address curricular changes, we certainly

have the power to suggest what might be considered. GTAs are often on the bottom rungs of the ladder of power in a university, let alone GTAs that teach composition, so it's safe to assume that GTAs and other contingent adjunct faculty occupy the least agency, though they often perform the most legwork for the university. Ultimately, a bottom-up approach considers not only contingent faculty like GTAs but students, too, should have agency over and in what they learn.

One of the ways I am attempting to alleviate and minimize the change in conditions of labor for first-year composition instructors interested in utilizing this new framework is by adopting a current, typical syllabus and simply switching out the assignments on a 1:1 basis. I firmly believe in creating the most seamless transition in curriculum possible, and part of that is recognizing that many first-year composition instructors have various materials already prepared and polished. By slightly tweaking the approach/theme of a composition course, we invite more discussion surrounding the nonacademic literacies most of our students engage in on a daily basis.

For example, if I were to take my own CO150 syllabus (Appendix) I'd switch out A1: Personal Narrative for A1: Fan Autoethnography. A2: Research Logs becomes A2: Analysis of a Fanwork, A3: Academic Argument becomes A3: Fandom Argument, and A4: Advocacy Infographic/Proposal becomes A4: Remix/remediation of previous assignment. I will further describe these assignments in the following section, but the point I want to emphasize is that the goals of the assignments would remain similar if not the same, except students now have the opportunity to engage in something they are explicitly passionate about, and also learn to navigate spaces that develop critical digital and media literacies.

## **The Curriculum, As It Could Be**

A fandom framework does many things for a first-year composition curriculum; it allows students to realize full agency over their work and their identities, guides students toward critically engaging with the media they consume, provides opportunities for producing rhetorically multimodal texts, and allows a space for students to gain confidence in their literacies while remaining affectively safe with a topic they already care for. Luckily, composition scholars have already started work toward including fandom into first-year composition curriculums, with DeLuca outlining three key principles when designing this type of course. DeLuca writes,

“Design assignments that recognize and create safe spaces for students to engage issues and/or topics that matter to them; help students locate new publics and counterpublics that they can engage with their compositions and potentially affect change that is meaningful to them and those publics; encourage students to be rhetorically responsive audience members, both in the classroom and within the online and offline affinity groups and communities that they may be a part of” (89-90).

This was incredibly helpful when I was designing my own fandom framework, as was Aubrey Schiavone’s fandom framework examples and sample syllabus that she provided as part of her presentation in Chicago at the 2023 Conference on College Composition and Communication (Appendix). I also drew heavily from McClantoc’s work, utilizing the guidance that a course like this should be designed with these three key characteristics in mind:

“1) Knowledge is produced by participatory and autonomous learning, 2)  
Classroom assignments encourage students to explore and express their own

identities while regarding the identities of others, and 3) peer review is based on transparent, collaborative efforts around subjects of students' own interests” (Mcclantoc).

To begin designing a course not necessarily centered around but based in fandom was challenging, because I wanted to avoid the narrow view of fandom only as a product rather than something to also practice that Mcclantoc warns against. Ultimately, I came up with assignments that I could easily pop into my current curriculum without much overall structural change. Obviously there would need to be scaffolding for defining new key concepts and terms like digital literacy, media literacy, online fandom, and the introduction of different genres calls for class discussion and activities centered around gaining confidence in that genre. Overall, though, I’ve tried to design the major assignments as closely as possible to the existing curriculum while staying true to the framework I’m proposing. I hope to show through the following tables how a fandom framework still reaches all the outcomes a typical first-year composition course should reach, while also clearly identifying the literacies and practices we expect students to enact.

*Table 8: Current CO150 Course Outcomes vs. Sample Fandom CO150 Course Outcomes*

Current CO150 Course Outcomes	Sample Fandom CO150 Course Outcomes
<p>Sample syllabus for Composition 150 states: “Students should be able to</p> <p><b>Deepen Rhetorical Knowledge</b></p> <p>a. Focus on rhetorical situation, audience,</p>	<p><b>Deepen Rhetorical Knowledge</b></p> <p>a. Focus on rhetorical situation, audience, and purpose.</p> <p>b. Use voice, tone, format, and</p>

<p>and purpose.</p> <p>b. Use voice, tone, format, and structure appropriately, deepening understanding of relationships between form and content in writing.</p> <p>c. Write and read texts written in several genres, for specified discourse communities. These communities may include professional or disciplinary discourse communities.</p> <p><b>Deepen Experience in Writing</b></p> <p>a. Develop recursive strategies for generating ideas, revising, editing, and proofreading for extensive, in-depth, and/or collaborative projects.</p> <p>b. Critique one's own and other's work.</p> <p>c. Practice reflective strategies.</p> <p><b>Deepen Critical and Creative Thinking</b></p> <p>a. Evaluate the relevance of context.</p> <p>b. Synthesize other points of view within one's own position.</p> <p>c. Reflect on the implications and</p>	<p>structure appropriately, deepening understanding of relationships between form and content in writing.</p> <p>c. Produce and analyze texts written in several genres—both analog and digital—for specified discourse communities.</p> <p><b>Deepen Experience in Writing</b></p> <p>a. Develop digital media literacy for composing multimodal projects.</p> <p>b. Develop recursive strategies for generating ideas, revising, editing, and proofreading for extensive, in-depth, and/or collaborative multimodal projects.</p> <p>c. Critique one's own and other's work.</p> <p>d. Practice reflective strategies.</p> <p><b>Deepen Critical and Creative Thinking</b></p> <p>a. Evaluate the relevance of context.</p> <p>b. Synthesize other points of view</p>
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<p>consequences of the stated conclusion.</p> <p><b>Use Sources and Evidence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Select and evaluate appropriate sources and evidence.</li> <li>b. Evaluate the relevance of sources to the research question.</li> </ul> <p><b>Deepen Application of Composing Conventions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Apply genre conventions including structure, paragraphing, tone, mechanics, syntax, and style to more extensive or in-depth writing projects.</li> <li>b. Use specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation appropriately.</li> </ul>	<p>within one's own position.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. Reflect on the implications and consequences of the stated conclusion.</li> </ul> <p><b>Use Sources and Evidence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Develop digitally literate research methods to select and evaluate appropriate sources and evidence.</li> <li>b. Evaluate the relevance of sources to the research question.</li> <li>c. Understand the implications of citations and represent multiple perspectives and types of sources.</li> </ul> <p><b>Deepen Application of Composing Conventions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Apply genre and medium conventions including structure, tone, mechanics to more extensive or in-depth multimodal projects.</li> <li>b. Utilize digital media literacy to use specialized vocabulary, format, and documentation appropriately.</li> </ul>
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*Table 9: CSU Assignment Prompts vs. Sample Fandom Assignment Prompts*

CSU Assignment Prompts	Fandom Assignment Prompts
<p><b>Assignment 1 Prompt:</b> “This personal narrative essay is an opportunity to put your experience in conversation with your peers, while practicing skills useful to academic and creative writing. In this assignment you will practice key skills for success in academic writing such as honoring personal experience, developing content in a story arc, organizing paragraphs, and writing with an audience and purpose in mind, while also developing your story to this audience.</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose one specific experience considering Healthy State’s four pillars of health or another approved topic from in-class brainstorming sessions.</li> <li>• Review the A1 Rubric for specific grading criteria and pay attention</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assignment 1 Prompt:</b> This fandom autoethnographic essay is an opportunity to put your affinities, joys, and experiences in conversation with your peers, while practicing skills useful to academic and creative writing. In this assignment, you will practice key skills for success in autoethnographic writing, such as honoring personal experience, developing storied content, organizing paragraphs, analyzing your personal rhetorical situation, and developing content with an audience and purpose in mind.</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a 5-6 page autoethnographic essay with rhetorically-appropriate organization.</li> <li>• Choose 1-2 fandoms/affinity</li> </ul>

<p>in class for instruction on how to meet the criteria successfully.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a narrative of 600-900 words (2 1/2 -3 1/2 pages) with MLA formatting: double-spaced, Times New Roman 12-point font, with 1” margins. Narratives are often short, so the word count is designed for the audience’s expectations and the genre conventions</li> <li>• An introduction with a thesis that conveys your main point</li> <li>• Throughout your body paragraphs, develop your narrative in detail. Use imagery, dialogue, detail, and description to help your primary audience visualize the moment as if they were there; show your story, don’t just tell it. Use the five senses to help you decide what details to include. Because this is a short narrative, you will need to carefully</li> </ul>	<p>groups you belong to and describe your history as a fan of those things.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define what fandom and being a fan means to you personally.</li> <li>• Show the fandom practices you currently engage with and how you became invested in those practices.</li> <li>• Reflect on how your feelings of being a fan may have evolved over time.</li> </ul>
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<p>choose your examples. It might help as you write to ask yourself “what does my audience need to know?” and “does this example/description/etc. help my audience understand my thesis?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include reflection: (1) what you were thinking and feeling at that point in time and (2) what you are thinking and feeling now that you have had time to reflect.</li> <li>• A conclusion that moves your audience more deeply into the conversation.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Assignment 2 Prompt:</b></p> <p>The Research Logs are both a tool for researchers to track and synthesize sources, as well as an important part of the inquiry and research process. Each Research Log will follow the conversation model, which reflects the natural inquiry and research process that most</p>	<p><b>Assignment 2 Prompt:</b> The opportunity to rhetorically analyze a piece of fanwork provides you with skills like tracking and synthesizing sources, as well as an important part of the inquiry and research process. This assignment asks you to locate a fanwork and argue the potential implications for the production,</p>

<p>professional and academic researchers follow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Log 1: Listening to the Conversation</li> <li>–Log 2: Expanding the Conversation</li> <li>–Log 3: Joining the Conversation</li> </ul>	<p>distribution, and consumption of remixed, fanmade media. This assignment will build on your existing media literacy skills while helping you develop those skills further by encouraging you to critically examine a piece of media.</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a 6-7 page analysis of a fanwork of your choosing, organized in a rhetorically-appropriate way.</li> <li>• Identify the rhetorical elements—author, audience, purpose, context, medium—</li> <li>• Utilize course materials and outside sources as needed—include a minimum of 5 sources.</li> <li>• Argue how or why your chosen fanwork matters to its particular fandom and general fandom.</li> </ul>
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	<p><b>Assignment 2b Prompt:</b></p> <p>Present your analysis and facilitate class discussion over your issue. You should prepare to present for 6-8 minutes, and facilitate class discussion or a related activity for 5 minutes. Your presentation and facilitation may take whatever form that helps you communicate your analysis of the issue most effectively.</p>
<p><b>Assignment 3 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“In this assignment you will practice writing an academic argument essay using scholarly research to persuade readers. The research, writing, and persuasive skills you learn can be used in your CSU courses, your current jobs, and your future careers. Your purpose is to persuade your audience about an issue relating to health and well-being. You will need to think carefully about the argument you make, what reasons and evidence you use to support your thesis,</p>	<p><b>Assignment 3 Prompt:</b> In this assignment, you will practice writing a researched argument essay over an issue in your chosen fandom using scholarly and popular research to persuade your audience. The research, writing, and persuasive skills you learn can be used in your CSU courses, your current jobs, and your future careers; the ability to argue is key to the ability to communicate. Your purpose is to persuade your audience about an issue related to your chosen fandom. You will need to think</p>

the audience to whom you'll write, and how you will appeal to your audience.

*Your researched academic argument should include the following:*

–Write an academic argument essay of 1200-1500 word (5-6 pages, not including the Works Cited page), double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 point font, 1" margins, and MLA formatting. While academic argument essays vary in length, this assignment's word count is designed to give you room to develop your argument while considering genre conventions and audience expectations. Use appropriate rhetorical appeals to persuade your audience.

–An introduction with a thesis-driven argument based on your purpose.

Throughout your body paragraphs:

–Develop focused body paragraphs with topic sentences. Body paragraphs should include logical reasons and credible

rhetorically and critically about the argument you make, what reasons and evidence you use to support your thesis, the audience to whom you'll write, and how you will appeal to your audience.

Requirements:

- Write a researched argument essay of 1400-1700 words over a fandom issue of your choice.
- Include a thesis-driven argument based on your purpose.
- Develop focused body paragraphs that include logical reasons and credible evidence that further your thesis.
- Include at least 6 sources, both popular and scholarly and beyond, that offer diverse perspectives and further your thesis.
- Address a potential audience concern or objection to your argument.

<p>evidence that further the thesis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–Include at least 4 sources, both popular and scholarly, that offer varying perspectives and are synthesized appropriately.</li> <li>–Address at least one established concern or objection.</li> <li>–Paraphrase, quote, and explain source material appropriately for your specific audience.</li> <li>–A conclusion that does more than summarize your argument.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Assignment 4 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“This assignment focuses on learning how to persuade a stakeholder to take a specific action within the local community. This assignment also teaches you a new genre—either an action proposal or an advocacy infographic—and how to compose and design a document according to the genre conventions. In</p>	<p><b>Assignment 4 Prompt:</b> For this assignment, you should re-mediate or revise one of your earlier writing assignments in the course in a new form of media. Your options for remediation include your fan autoethnography, your fanwork analysis, or your researched argument. The goal of your remediation is to include new mediums and modalities</p>

<p>this unit, you will learn to identify a specific, local problem at CSU that is related to your A3 topic and develop a solution that your stakeholder can use, if they are so persuaded, to solve the problem. You will also learn to explain why the problem is exigent to the stakeholder and advocate for a new, specific solution. Since writers frequently adapt their writing for different genres and audiences, this assignment gives you practice with skills you will use in other classes, your workplace, and your life.”</p> <p>Both genres have different requirements.</p>	<p>into your project. Consider opportunities to combine multiple modalities, like visual and audio, into your project by creating a video essay or embedding background music into a blog post. Compose your project with a public stakeholder audience in mind for the specific purpose of your choosing. This assignment builds off of the digital media multiliteracies we’ve helped each other develop all semester.</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compose a multimodal, multimedia project that remediates or revises one of your earlier writing assignments in this course.</li> <li>• Include a 2-3 page reflection letter that demonstrates the rhetorical choices you made in designing your project for your specific audience and why you think those moves are effective for achieving</li> </ul>
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	your purpose.
<p><b>Assignment 5 Prompt:</b></p> <p>“Throughout the semester you have practiced metacognition, or “thinking about thinking,” before, during, and after the writing process. In this portfolio assignment, you will practice semester-long metacognition by reflecting across your CO150 experience. Metacognition is a critical skill for all of us; it teaches us to think about and explain what we are learning. In the workplace, employees use metacognition in their annual reviews to explain how they have improved as employees. This assignment is an opportunity to learn more about yourself, what you learned in CO150, and the ways you can carry those skills and practices into your future work.”</p> <p>Includes both reflection letter and revision plan and an optional revision of</p>	<p><b>Assignment 5 Prompt:</b> Throughout the semester, you have practiced metacognition, or “thinking about your thinking,” before, during, and after the writing process. For your final portfolio assignment, you will practice semester-long metacognition by reflecting across your experience as a student and a writer in first-year composition. Metacognition is a critical skill for all of us; it teaches us to think about and explain what we are learning. This assignment is an opportunity for you to learn more about yourself, what you learned this semester, and the ways you can carry those literacies, skills, and practices into your future. It is also an opportunity for you to reflect on what you <i>wish</i> you had learned. Your primary audience should be yourselves, so that a year from now, you can pick up this portfolio and catch a</p>

<p>an earlier assignment.</p>	<p>glimpse of who and where you used to be!</p> <p>Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a 750-1000 word letter reflecting on what you have learned this semester.</li> <li>• Identify, summarize, and reflect on at least 3 course outcomes and how you worked or are still working to develop those skills through our coursework or otherwise.</li> <li>• Reflect on one or two things you wish you had learned in our first-year composition course this semester.</li> <li>• Conclude with a new goal for next semester based on your reflection.</li> </ul>
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## CHAPTER 6: LIMITATIONS, FUTURE IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

My goal when writing this thesis was to explore the current values and literacies enacted in two first-year composition programs and autoethnographically analyze the effectiveness of our curriculum here at CSU before providing a framework for student development of digital media literacies through engaging within fandom. I am incredibly passionate about students developing these multiliteracies because they are already functioning in a space that enacts those literacies whether they realize it or not, and I want to prepare them to face any context, genre, medium, and rhetorical situation; the way to do that is through critical digital media literacies. Including autoethnographic data in this thesis was also important to me, because I felt there was no better way to communicate how our curricula, students, and instructors interact with each other. I think my students would be proud of the work I've done here—I'm certainly proud of them for speaking up and advocating for themselves. I believe fandom can further encourage students to self-advocate, on top of all the other literacy benefits.

Of course, there are and always will be limitations to any framework one could propose for first-year writing, and fandom is no different. There are many pitfalls associated with the participation in fandom culture, including the very toxic elements that many people easily fall prey to. Because fandom is so tightly interwoven with the production and reification of culture, it can become a rather polarizing practice to engage in. Anti-fandom, a way of engaging in fandom through dislike and distrust rather than love and trust, has become a very important facet of conversations surrounding the legitimacy of fandoms in classrooms. People who participate in anti-fandom aren't necessarily disrespectful, hateful, or bitter, but the ways in which they interact with

media can be. If we are trying to teach students to be respectful civic participants, is anti-fandom a pathway to that, or to further polarization? How does hate-watching factor into the first-year writing classroom? In an attempt to uncover the meaning and potential behind anti-fandom, scholar Jonathan Gray tells other fandom scholars that “we should expect anti-fandom to at times be productive, progressive, and nuanced, to tell us about audiences’ hopes and expectations for the media writ large, and hence to be a key site for understanding why, how, and when the media matters to us and why, how, and when it doesn’t” (40). However, a new concept arose out of broader understandings of antifandom, that of the “toxic fandom.” Only recently have scholars begun to dig into this idea of a “toxic fandom,” or the dark and ugly sides of fandom practices. Scholar Mel Stanfill argues that we must have a better understanding of how “reactionary politics manifest in fandom or take fannish forms” (129). It is true that fandom can become a catalyst for polarization and politicization, and it is even truer that the strategies and practices many fans utilize can lend to further polarization and reactionary communication.

However, to those who might say these are reasons to keep fandom out of the classroom, I say: why? I could have said the same things about any media, any educational setting. The fact of the matter is, our world encourages polarization and reactionary communication, and we must find ways to combat this urge and develop skills for effective, respectful civic participation and engagement. The best way to develop these skills is to invite real-world communication and contexts—like fandom—into the classroom where we can critically examine and question the practices we use to participate. I would rather my students be exposed to toxic rhetoric inside my classroom where we can dissect its strategies, than have to navigate those rhetorics on their own,

without the help of naming the literacies involved with navigating those rhetorics. I would think a way to avoid, or mitigate, the potential of toxicity within fandom would be to include many opportunities and assignments for reflection: reflection of involvement and participation, of others' involvement and participation, of what feels right and wrong, of fandom community practices. The more time we spend reflecting on the strategies and literacies involved with online fandom participation, the more students will gain. Providing explicit, concrete examples of critical digital media literacy and how it helps students navigate the online fandom world will encourage students to transfer those skills to other areas where critical digital literacy is needed (hint: everywhere).

What I hope to have shown by now is how much first-year composition has to gain from simply overtly naming the digital and media literacy practices we expect students to enact in our classrooms and moving toward actively incorporating them into our curricula, and one of the ways instructors can approach this is through incorporating a fandom framework to their writing courses. There are several directions a fandom framework could attempt to go: there are possibilities for fanfiction assignments, unique and affective online composition and collaboration, and simply put, more moments for students to express their excitement and joy for something they love. Bringing fandom into the classroom is not a new idea—Henry Jenkins popularized the term “acafan” and many scholars have happily adopted this identity, and their fandoms, into their teaching personas. But as I noted earlier, this idea of fandom within academics, and especially composition, is still trying to take shape and prove its value. Soon, though, we will move forward as time does and we will see new technologies and literacies form, and I certainly can't say that online fandom will stand the test of time, but the value in incorporating the idea of fandom into a first-year composition course is

nearly limitless. When given the opportunity to explore topics they want to learn about or already enjoy, students are more likely to remain engaged with the work and strive to develop the literacy practices that allow them to do the work effectively.

### **The Future: Materialism of Digital Media**

I feel compelled to add one last section on the materialism of digital media and how that impacts the ways we approach interacting with it and even teaching it now and in the future. In *Materialist Media Theory*, media scholar Grant Bollmer writes, “Most media are designed to store something for a period of time, with recordings limited to the particular physical form that characterizes that medium” (p. 51). What Bollmer describes here is the delicate temporality and materiality of technology: a piece of media can only exist if the medium can still support it. The way we inscribe media makes all the difference—some inscriptions and mediums will last longer than others based on their physical characteristics. A stone carved with an image will likely maintain its media far longer than a stone painted with an image. Understanding how inscription ties into the materiality of media is important, because methods of inscription evolve, and the movement of time and innovation renders past objects as ‘obsolete.’ All media must fight against oblivion, but they can only do so through the physical expression available—vinyl records were almost extinct before they were made popular again through the resurgence of vinyl record players, enabling them to live on (for now). Mediums, as Bollmer argues, have an expiration date dependent on their physicality, materiality, and how they were inscribed.

Not only must we face the lack of availability of old films and formats, but the growing concern of our existing media being subject to decay has caught the attention of

many scholars. Despite our efforts to maintain old films and formats we still have access to, their technologies are fading and failing, and with each passing day we lose many pieces of media—films, music, television shows, and novels—to the harsh strokes of time. At one point, we may have thought streaming services and the Internet would save us from further loss and decay, but time has proven us wrong. As technology shifts further from the physicality of media, the materiality is still relevant. Even films that survived the evolution from VHS to streaming services aren't guaranteed to survive the next streaming catalogue purge, and online archives responsible for storing media history can disappear with one single click of the mouse. The consequences of having materiality, and thus mortality, are rampant within digital media studies. Fortunately, we don't necessarily have to depend on the physicality and materiality of a single piece of media to enjoy it. Another way to maintain this perceived indefinite access to a piece of media is by joining an online fandom community, a place where discussion keeps media content alive, even if it has long passed its accessible days. The Internet provides opportunities for new inscriptions to be made and symbolically replace older, less accessible inscriptions, so that no matter the medium, a piece of media can live on through new materiality. Participating in online fandom communities and engaging specifically in fanfiction creates a sense of engagement with the piece of media, partly suspending its materiality and mortality. However, there are instances in which the materiality of certain mediums and media serves as the catalyst for fandom and fanfiction—if there is a threat to content fans enjoy, fans will keep it alive, however possible. While many fans write online fanfiction—thus creating new inscriptions—to offset the emotional damage of losing access to other material media, these inscriptions are still impermanent, subject to the same rules as all media.

I don't yet know how to incorporate materialist media theory into a first-year composition classroom, but working to include media literacy is a great place to start. Media literacy matters so much because our mediums are constantly evolving, and inclusion of materialist media theory is a direction we need to be heading in composition studies because our methods of composition always depend on what mediums exist at the time. There is value in studying mediums that we will lose, same as there is value in understanding that we will lose our mediums that we're comfortable with in favor of technological advancement, and we have to be prepared to meet those changes with the rhetorical, critical, and functional digital media literacies necessary for success in any medium, genre, or rhetorical situation.



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## APPENDIX

2022-2023 CO150 Syllabus developed by the Composition faculty at Colorado State University:

[CO150-36 Spring Syllabus.pdf](#)

Sample 2022-2023 First-Year Writing Syllabus developed by Dr. Aubrey Schiavone at the University of Denver:

[W22 1122 Fans Syllabus MW.pdf](#)