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Text/Design/Code

Advice on Developing and Producing a Scholarly Webtext

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I've been an editor at *Kairos*—one of the longest continuously publishing peer-reviewed journals in writing studies—for over twenty years, and during that time, I've developed a repertoire of advice for authors who want to embrace the challenge of creating digital scholarly works that take full advantage of the multimedia and networked affordances of the Web. At *Kairos*, we call this kind of article a "webtext," both to distinguish it as not-only-print, which seems to be the common understanding of "article" but also to acknowledge that it is not, formally speaking, "hypertext." (We considered sticking with "hypertext" just to annoy the late-1990s hypertext theorists, but since some of those folks were our authors and one of our audiences, we went the Ulmerian route of replacing a perfectly good extant word with our own neologism.) Webtexts, it turns out, are a lot harder to craft than traditional print journal articles. For one thing, most of us don't have the depth of training and practice in producing multimedia that we have in print-based writing. There's also the additive nature—not only does a webtext author need to produce an argument (usually supported by alphabetic writing), but that argument needs to be elucidated and supported by both the content *and the design* of the webtext—and the text, media, design, and code all have to work together to present a coherent and usable end product.

When developing a webtext, it is important right at the outset, in the process of invention, to simultaneously draft the text, the design (including media elements such as image, audio, and video) and the code; the final work should integrate all three as equal contributors to the overall rhetorical effect of your work. It's also important to consider two critical aspects that we don't usually consciously address in the traditional article: usability and accessibility. Building with usability and accessibility as key aims from the outset will prevent time-consuming and potentially technically challenging revisions as you move toward publication. In the following

three sections, I'll present some succinct advice for authors of scholarly webtexts, focusing on text, design, and code.

Text. Even though we tend to be well trained in text production, it's never a bad idea to do some preparatory work when drafting a new article or transfiguring a seminar paper or conference presentation into a publishable work. As a reviewer of both digital and print scholarly works, I've found that the biggest challenges relate to audience, context, argument, and organization. I find it helpful to draft a short specifications document that explicitly identifies the audiences I want to reach. This document also includes a brief report about the target journal, addressing questions like: How does that venue articulate its audiences and purpose? What do the editors say about the journal's goals and requirements? What media and design platforms do they support? What citation format do they want? This last piece of information may seem relatively inconsequential, but it actually helps to understand what the journal values—if they use an author-date format for in-text citations, then the timeliness and currency of the references you use are seen as important; if they use MLA style, then the authority and status of the people you choose to cite are more important.

The more you know about the journal you aim to publish in, the more likely you will be crafting a version that will resonate with reviewers for that journal (see also Duffy's chapter in this volume). I strongly advocate spending time with past issues, both to see how articles in that journal are constructed and to make sure that you don't miss any relevant research that you should include in your literature review or theoretical framing (both editors and peer reviewers notice when authors fail to do their due diligence).

When you are working on a webtext, I strongly recommend using a plain-text writing platform that will allow you to develop the text in the environment you plan to publish in; basically, don't use Microsoft Word, because its design will be the default—and you will want to develop your own sense of design.

Design. For most authors, design is the most challenging element of creating a webtext. Most of us are great with words, but don't often have to craft the design of our work (beyond the occasional opportunity to select the fonts used in our textual products). Design is an integral part of a webtext, and it must be decided upon early so that it can be woven into the work as a whole;

if you simply write a text and then add design, it will be neither well integrated nor effective. The design choices you make should guide the reader through the text and should facilitate the relationships between text, image, and media that you want to foreground. The selection of media is also key: which media work best to illuminate your argument? If you need both sound and video, then video works; if you just need sound, select audio files (i.e., don't default to video if it's not the most appropriate vehicle). PDFs are notoriously inaccessible (and difficult to edit), so be certain their use is necessary and warranted if you decide to use them.

I've found that thinking in terms of visual metaphor is a productive way to start working on a design, asking what metaphor would best support your argument. If your argument is about networks or rhizomes, then a network visualization might be a good starting point. You can also use the core principles of contrast, alignment, repetition, and proximity, as well as hiding and revealing, to solidify the overall design. And, of course, spending time looking at other scholars' design choices and analyzing their effectiveness is an excellent way to build your own design sensibilities.

Design is not just visual, though—it's also important to consider the full effect of the interface (visual, auditory, kinetic) as well as the ways in which your readers will interact with the text. Navigation choices and implementation are very important elements of your text's information design: good navigation schema can enhance usability and accessibility; bad navigation can render your work unreadable. And, of course, all of your design decisions need to be supported by the underlying code.

Code. Perhaps one of the biggest editorial challenges we face is cleaning up and optimizing the HTML, CSS, and JavaScript code that serve as the infrastructure for a webtext.

Although it is beyond the scope of this brief chapter to provide detailed instructions, I can note some "best practices" that all webtext authors should engage. The main issue for coding is consistency—consistency in file-naming conventions (keep them all lowercase; don't put spaces in the name), consistency in the naming of *divs* and *spans* within the HTML code, consistency in following and using a standard (such as the recommended HTML 5). Webtext authors should be careful not to use proprietary systems (like Adobe Flash), because they are difficult to sustain. Webtexts should also be portable and archivable (thus, sites like Wix and Weebly should be avoided until or unless they are more easily exported). The coding choices made should support

the design and the argument—for instance, it's not a good idea to use a fancy JavaScript if the effect isn't an integral or supportive element that furthers the main purpose of the webtext.

Adding metadata—embedded information about the webtext itself, such as the names of authors, title, date of creation, and copyright information—is part of the coding process, but the particulars of how to code metadata may be specified by the journal (much like the citation format for the text). Metadata is a critical component that improves findability and long-term sustainability.

Finally, when working on the code of a webtext, it is an excellent practice to keep in mind (just as it is while working on the design) usability and accessibility issues and to learn about and apply the code-level features (such as responsive design and accessibility standards) that support them.

A well-designed webtext can perform a scholarly argument through the interplay of text, design, and code—but each element needs to be as carefully crafted as all of the others.