

# *Writing Spaces*

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### The Zine Project: Reorienting Concepts of Composition through Multimodal Reflection

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# The Zine Project: Reorienting Concepts of Composition through Multimodal Reflection

Tania de Sostoa-McCue

## Overview

This assignment is intended to be a transition, preparing students for practice in moving from alphabetic to multimodal projects. The goal of this assignment is for students to take a familiar genre (in this case, post-project reflections) and practice how they might transform an alphabetic assignment into a multimodal deliverable. The zine assignment carries a low point value and is not traditionally graded, a practice that creates a lower-stakes space for experimentation and productive failure.

Over the course of the semester, students have written one-to-two-page reflection papers that require them to consider the process and product of their work. Tasking students with reimagining a familiar genre asks them to continue a course goal practicing generative discomfort and productive failure. Articulated by Boler, a pedagogy of discomfort functions in differing ways, including opening avenues for “invitation to inquiry” (176). Students who have become familiar with the genre being adapted have come to understand how to give the “right” answers. There are no “right” answers in this project—rather students must discern what message most matters, and what compositional choices might help deliver the message in a new format.

This zine assignment functions in multiple ways, fulfilling a few key purposes. Transitioning students from a semester of alphabetic-only composition into multimodal composition opens avenues to consider differing strategies, the power of rhetorical choice, and the relationship between purpose and audience. Multi-modality in the composition classroom asks students to draw on multiple semiotic modes, a practice advocated for by scholars in the field of composition (Luther, Prins and Farmer). The zine assignment begins the process of asking students to utilize different semiotic modes by having them practice adding one new mode—the visual. Larger multimodal projects that follow will ask students to practice additional modes for a higher point value. The zine assignment is structured to create a safe space for students to begin to experiment and familiarize themselves with differing forms of composition in preparation for these larger projects.

Keeping in mind the historical and contextual nature of zine culture, this zine assignment is ungraded; students earn points through completion of the project. Not only does this practice help ease student anxiety over perceived “artistic ability,” but also considers the inherently counter-culture nature of zine making. In so doing, this assignment “attempts to equalize power and deconstruct hierarchies” (Desyllas and Sinclair). Prior to making zines, students are introduced to their history, culture, purpose and creation. They are then asked to reexamine the prompting questions used in previous reflections. Students and instructors discuss the affordances and limitations of transforming what would previously be a two-page reflection into a zine. Students are offered two two-hour class periods and materials needed to create zines in class. They are given freedom to ask each other and myself questions in a more relaxed environment. Considering that, by nature, “Zines are not made to be works of perfection, but rather ‘work(s) in progress,’” this assignment works to create space for play while also experiencing discomfort in a generative, low-stakes manner (Desyllas and Sinclair). Once the zines are completed, students engage in a short conversation with the

instructor about the choices, the purpose, and the product they've presented. Giving students an opportunity to individually discuss their product and process in a less formal format allows for personal feedback while also asking them to consider the need to articulate the compositional choices they made.

### Time Commitment

2 Class sessions (4 hours)

### Materials

Prior to class students are encouraged to donate craft materials they have that they might want to use, or share, such as: magazines, stickers, markers, colored pencils. As this is a making project, students are provided with a blank sheet of paper, preferably Tabloid (11x17). Anything larger than letter sized works, however a larger sized paper created a larger zine, which students enjoy for ease of use. Zines can be made well, and effectively, with a single marker and paper. Any additional supplies available, including glue, colored paper, recycled paper, scrapbooking materials or scissors can be used.

### Assignment or Activity Process

- Students will begin with a brief introduction to zines. Drawing from "[What is a Zine](#)" and "[A Brief History of Zines](#)," students will familiarize themselves with the genre. Highlighting a short history of zines provides context for a genre most students aren't familiar with. Additionally, this helps to frame the inherent flexibility in this form of composition as well as provides important historical and cultural context. Students are invited to discuss why zines matter—that is to say, to understand the benefits of self-produced work that operates outside traditional compositional outlets.

- Next students can look at example zines created by past students for different prompts and by the instructor. Students are tasked with reimagining a familiar form into something more abstract, so providing examples of different products that differ from their own leaves room for them to imagine without unintentional replication. Allowing students to see and interact with a product the instructor allows them space to ask questions about the process and product.
- Students are given two short videos on making zines to watch. “[How to Make a Zine From One Piece of Printed Paper](#),” by the Oregonian offers an example of how a pared down zine can be effective when the creator is clear on purpose. “[How to Make a Zine Journal](#),” by Katie Gebley offers a more complex, art focused example. Students are offered a document with additional resources to use at their own desire or discretion.
- Next, students are engaged in a conversation about how we will be taking a familiar form—reflection—and turning this into a zine. This lesson is contextualized as a steppingstone to larger stakes multimodal projects. The zine is a low-stakes experience in remixing that offers students an opportunity to pivot how they think about composition in multi-modal forms.
- Students revisit previous reflections written at the end of major class projects. Not only are students asked what they believe the purpose of reflections were, but what they felt worked and what they felt didn’t work; what engaged them, what contributed to their understanding of recursive growth. This exercise opens the door for students to begin to mine the *why* and the *how* behind lessons they’ve completed. They must contextualize this learning with the journey of their experiences with the project they have just completed; here students must re-examine what they have done but consider how they might apply those experiences to a current reflection. Doing so invites students into their processes

not just as passive recipients but as stakeholders in the experience. Asking them to articulate why an assignment did or did not achieve the purpose they perceived creates space for a deeper engagement in their own purpose and connection to the final product.

- Once students have examined purpose and success in regard to past reflection, they are tasked with brainstorming how they might take previous reflective questions and adjust them to fit a prompt that is not a written product. Students must contend with the act of paring down, as previous reflective essays address six prompts. As a class, we create a list of concerns: *What won't work and why not? How can students make the intention or purpose work? What might need to change to do so effectively?*
- Students are given a five-minute period to free-write about their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Prompting questions are offered: *What aspects of previous reflection questions stand out to you now? What question/s are you most drawn to? What emotions or aspects of the journey stand out to you? What story do you want to tell about Project 2?*
- Next, students are provided with a piece of 11x17 piece of paper, and the instructor walks them through the process of transforming it into a single small zine. All materials for the creation of the zine are provided. They are given the remainder of the current and the next class period to create their zines. This time allows students to ask individual questions, to brainstorm with their groups, and to have less structured spaces to create that reflect the much less structured product they will be creating.
- Finally, students must briefly, individually, discuss their zine with the instructor when it is complete. They are asked to articulate what the purpose and story of the zine are. They must also share what compositional choices were made (colors, shapes, images, order) to support their final product.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the affordances and limitations of different forms of composition
- Practice taking concepts learned over the course of the term —rhetorical choices within a variety of compositional forms such as music, videos and art—and apply them
- Reflect on their role as stakeholders in their learning experiences
- Practice composition in multi-modal forms, preparing for future projects
- Think critically about their role as stakeholders in their learning experiences
- Practice discomfort, vulnerability, productive failure, and reframing “success” outside of familiar forms

## Learning Accommodations

- Students may look at further sources that include samples, how-to videos, articles, and more, and take time to explore options before beginning.
- Students may leave class to find a quiet space if needed for this purpose.
- Students are offered additional time to complete their project at home if necessary.

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