

## Working with Non-Textual Sources: A Primer

Since I am encouraging all of you to explore nontraditional options for both your first paper and your final project, I thought I would give you some tips and pointers on how to use something like an operating system in your papers. Here are some good rules of thumb for dealing with non-textual sources:

### 1. **The Rule of the Postmodern; Or, There's No Such Thing as a Non-Textual Source**

We've done a fair amount of postmodernism-bashing in our discussion of Landow, and perhaps for good reason. But some of the insights of contemporary critical theory are extremely useful for pursuing a project that uses non-textual sources. Take, for example, the insights of Clifford Geertz. Geertz is an anthropologist, and in "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" he introduced the idea that cultures can be *read*. Thus, he viewed the Balinese cockfight as a text, and interpreted that text to say something about Balinese culture.

Geertz, of course, is not alone. There's a whole field of cultural studies and a whole other (if overlapping) field of film studies. What all of these groups have in common is a different understanding of what "text" means. Think of text, then, as something like a "meaning vehicle." Text carries meaning, and if you know how to decode the text, you get the payload of meaning. In this sense, *everything* is a text, because everything carries meaning (well, layers and layers of meaning).

So, the first thing to realize about working with non-textual sources is that they are, really, textual sources—they carry meaning and so you can treat them much like normal, printed, language-based texts. That's why Stephenson, for example, is able to "read" OS's—because he sees they're based on *metaphor*. Similarly, you can read this:



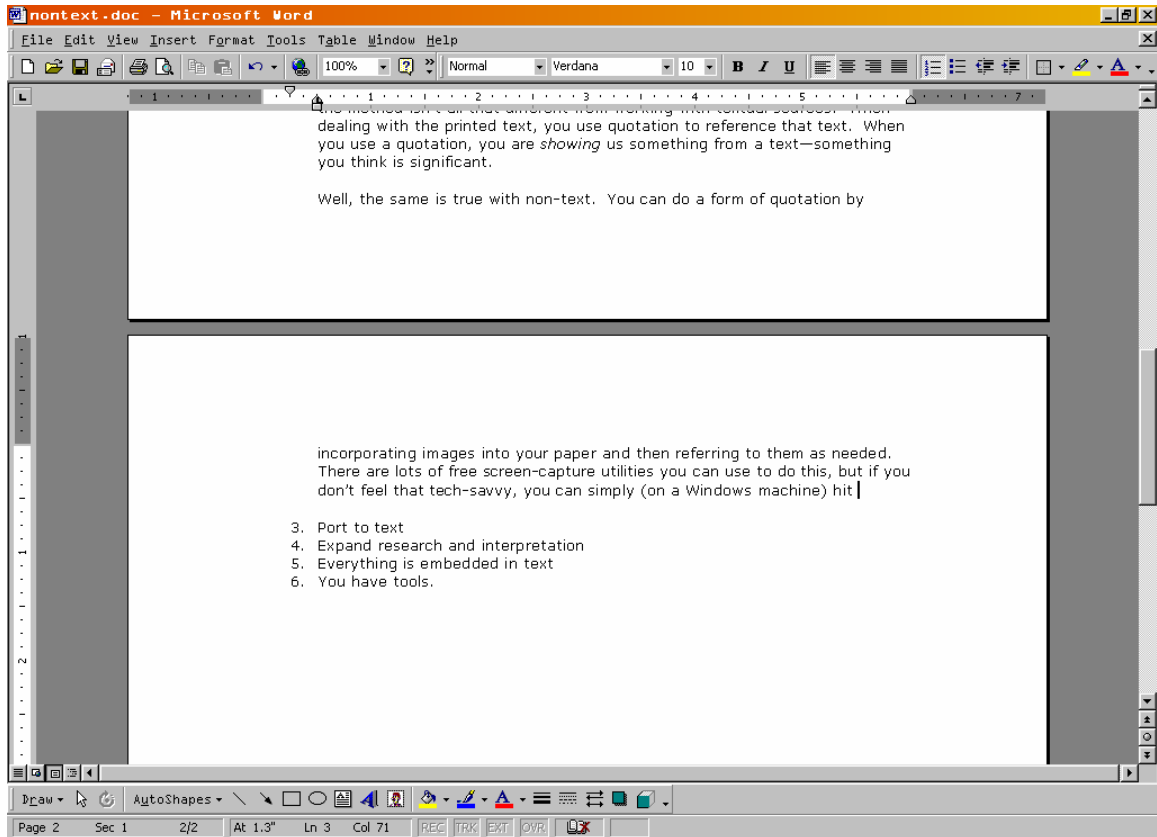
It's the new Apple iMac, and it *means something*. In its design, it encodes certain values and when we read the iMac we can decode these values and say something about them.

### 2. **The Rule of the Great State of Missouri; Or, Show Me**

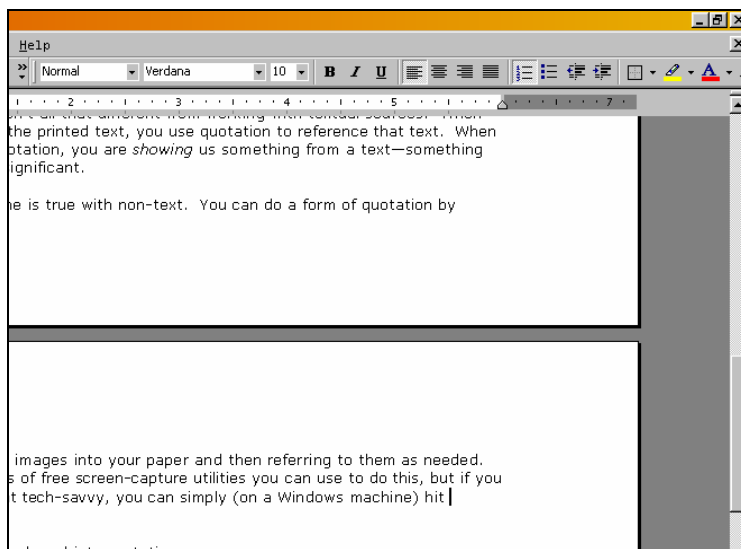
OK, so we can read non-text as text, but how do you *write* about it? To start, the method isn't all that different from working with textual sources. When dealing with the printed text, you use quotation to reference that text. When you use a quotation, you are *showing* us something from a text—something you think is significant.

Well, the same is true with non-text. You can do a form of quotation by incorporating images into your paper and then referring to them as needed. There are lots of free screen-capture utilities you can use to do this, but if you don't feel

that tech-savvy, you can simply (on a Windows machine) hit ALT + Print Screen which will send a copy of the screen to the clipboard. Then, in Word, just hit CTRL+V to paste it in, like this:



Word will also let you crop the picture down to size:



If this *still* seems too tech-savvy (and it's OK if it does), just include pages with pictures from magazines or just pasted into your text. It doesn't have to be elegant, because what matters is that I have the same visual text you have as I read your

interpretation of that text.

3. **The Rule of Port-Ability; Or, Translating Non-Textual Sources**

In the world of computers, “porting” involves moving a program from one operating system to another. So, one could say “Sure, Linux is nice but I can’t adopt it until Macromedia ports Flash and Dreamweaver over to Linux.”

Porting, then, is like translating—only it’s not. Programs change when ported because OS’s are, on some level, different registers—things don’t translate exactly. Porting recreates the original in a new environment while working with the strengths and weaknesses of that environment, which is what makes it different from translation, which always tries to recreate the original as exactly the same.

What this means for you in your papers is that you can port the non-textual source into text. It’s not the same, of course, and it’s not a translation, but it *is* functional and can even take advantage of the new textual environment.

Practically, this means a great deal of description, and description that can function as part of the argument you want to make. For example, let’s say I was doing a paper on the iMac and I wanted to make an argument about Apple, Eloi, and Morlocks. I might describe the computer like this:

*The case is not only hermetically sealed, but moreover is round. Not only is this unconventional in terms of home computers, but it further suggests a wholeness (the wholeness of the circle). The inner workings of the machine, even the cables that connect monitor to computer are fully hidden...*

Later, I might go into more detail, down to the intricacies of the size and shape of buttons, or the colors and materials used in construction. Providing descriptive detail ports the object of study into text and in porting (rather than translating) I take the opportunity to highlight the features that are most salient to my argument.

4. **The Rule of Gardening; Or, Leave No Rhizome Unrooted**

No text is a rhizome unto itself; all texts exist in networks. What this means for you is that rather than trying to make an argument with only one single rhizome, you can exploit all the rhizomes connected to your rhizome. Huh? Think of it this way: if you want to do a reading of the new iMac, you can use not just the computer itself, but all the texts *around* it as well—print ads, the apple website, TV commercials, cnet and zdnet reviews, apple user forum postings, amazon.com, reviews, and so on. Using all the texts connected to a text gives you more to work with; it also gives you access to print texts that connect to a non-text source (like a computer review).

5. **The Rule of Application; Or, Use What You’ve Learned**

Finally, realize that the theoretical readings we explored early in the semester give you the tools you need to do this kind of work by giving you a vocabulary and set of critical concepts to talk about all aspects of computers, technology, and cyberspace. So, use them. Introduce a concept like “cyborg,” define it via the theorist, then apply it to your non-text text.