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## Shaking the Magic 8 Ball: Social Media for Readers and Writers

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COURTESY OF LAURA  
MADELINE WISEMAN

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COURTESY OF ADAM WAGLER

**Adam Wagler** is an assistant professor of advertising and public relations at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's College of Journalism and Mass Communications. He teaches design, development, and creative strategy courses using interactive and traditional media. His professional and research interests revolve around interactive media and technology in communications, advertising, and education. An Apple Distinguished Educator (2011), Wagler was a visiting professor at Colle + McVoy in Minneapolis (2010), and received the American Advertising Federation's Most Promising Minority Student Nominator award (2012). He is a doctoral candidate at UNL in instructional technology with an emphasis in informal learning using emerging technologies. [www.adamwagler.com](http://www.adamwagler.com)

### 1. OVERVIEW

- **Assignment:** Students follow an author on a social network and create a portfolio of writing in which they reflect on the ways in which the author used the site to engage rhetorically with readers.
- **Courses:** Composition; introduction to literature; fiction; creative writing; journalism; communications.

- **Literature:** Social media posts written by contemporary authors.
- **Technology:** A computer or smartphone with access to social media sites.
- **Time:** Can be a brief one-week assignment or an extended six-week assignment.

## 2. GOALS OF THE ASSIGNMENT

We created this assignment to help students develop a rhetorical understanding of how readers, writers, and published literary authors use social media. Through a hands-on, real-world project, they develop critical thinking skills about media consumption as they participate in literary communities and explore new venues for writing.

The goals of this assignment are based on University of Nebraska–Lincoln and English Department outcomes, aims, and scope, and meet the criteria for the university’s Achievement–Centered Education (ACE) program. To meet the first ACE outcome, students

write texts, in various forms, with an identified purpose, that respond to specific audience needs, incorporate research or existing knowledge, and use applicable documentation and appropriate conventions of format and structure.

Furthermore, we created this assignment to primarily address the first two goals outlined by our department’s aims and scope for English 101:

- “Students will gain extended practice with composing processes (including invention, drafting, revision, and final editing) and explore a range of forms and purposes for their writing. Students will write *at least 3* sustained finished texts (the equivalent of 25 typed, double-spaced pages) in addition to a series of shorter writing assignments that lead (directly or indirectly) to the finished pieces.
- Students will develop their capacities for critically reading and responding to texts. Particular attention will be paid to helping students develop a working knowledge of rhe-

“Integrating mobile and social media into instruction creates opportunities for students to use technologies that many are comfortable with. [It also allows] instructors to extend the classroom beyond the scheduled meeting time. The result provides a space to explore the professional side of interactive media including concepts of audience, strategy, and communications.”

**Adam Wagler**  
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“Our assignment merges several assignments from two different disciplines, English and Communications. After teaching courses in women’s studies and consumerism at the University of Arizona, I began teaching English courses in composition, literature, and creative writing in 2006 at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL). At UNL I developed assignments to teach students skills in critical thinking and the rhetorical analysis of literature, popular culture, and creative writing.”

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torical concepts (audience, purpose, cultural context, genre and style) that students can apply to their own writing as well as other texts.”

Following is the assignment sheet that we provide to our students.

“I began teaching interactive media and creative advertising courses at UNL in 2006. My assignments integrate new technology and emerging media to address communications concepts and challenges. My research focuses on the integration of interactive media as a teaching tool. After discussions with Laura Wiseman on social media, audience, and emerging platforms for publications, we combined our assignments to create the one outlined in this chapter. This assignment was taught in four sections of English 101: Writing: Rhetoric and Reading and in one section of English 254: Writing and Communities in the English Department at UNL in 2012.”

**Adam Wagler**

### 3. ASSIGNMENT SHEET

#### Shaking the Magic 8 Ball: Social Media for Readers and Writers

Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 1: Choose a contemporary literary author you like and follow that author on a social media site.**

In Part I of this assignment, you will begin to research, participate in, and evaluate a social media site and your author's presence there. You'll also start to draft an essay—presenting your experience, recommendations, and analysis—that will become part of a final portfolio and presentation.

Social media can be used as a powerful marketing platform for promoting literary authors. In fact, publishers now use social media to help inform their decision-making processes (PBS Mediashift). The rise of social media sites has created individual writing, publishing, and reading platforms for individuals to share information, publish work, and connect with other writers. Each network has a unique audience, social norms, and niches that attract users to join and interact.

Authors, poets, and other writers look for ways to engage their audiences and distribute their writing (in all its forms) to interested parties. For example, *Poets & Writers'* public relations representative Lauren Cerand writes, "You can use Twitter to promote yourself and your writing, to engage your readers, or to stay current on the publishing and literary scenes" (79). Knowing the social media landscape is necessary if authors are to effectively convey their work and themselves. How one approaches, joins, and interacts with others online should be based on the rhetorical strategies of audience, purpose, cultural context, genre, and style, and for authors, delivering relevant content to readers is key.

Imagine you are working at a publishing company and your boss says: "We need to expand our social media efforts." She asks you to research a particular social media site and evaluate how literary authors present themselves (or are presented) there. Might that site be appropriate for promoting the authors your company publishes? Why or why not?

For this project, your task is to select a published literary author, follow that author on a social media site, participate at site, and write about it. Your finished product will be a portfolio that will include 8 to 10 pages of polished prose in which you document, reflect on, and describe the social media site, the opportunities it may create, the ways in which your author presents

himself/herself rhetorically, and your own evaluation of your experience posting content and interacting with others at the site. Your portfolio will also include screenshots or other artifacts that support your recommendation; ultimately you will translate your portfolio into a PowerPoint presentation to share with your class.

This project will give you a hands-on, real-world experience in which you analyze how a real author uses a real social media site for networking and promotion. As a participant and researcher, you will also develop your own rhetorical writing skills.

In order of preference, select your top 5 social media sites and authors of choice and submit them to your instructor. *No student may do the same author on the same network.* I will approve your choices and assign your author and network. Once approved, you will join and interact with others at the site by posting video, audio, photos, content, links, ideas, and whatever else is relevant to your network. You will follow what your author does, noting how he/she uses the site. Meanwhile, you will begin drafting and workshopping your essay in peer groups during class.

**Part 2: In an 8- to 10-page essay, analyze your author's chosen social media site, your author's presence on that site, and your experience as a participant at the site.**

In Part 2 of this assignment, ask yourself: What rhetorical concepts are at work at the site? How does your author use these concepts? How do you use them? How engaging is your experience?

In your 8- to 10-page essay, you will include information on three key areas (see below), paying particular attention to and incorporating the rhetorical concepts of purpose, audience, genre and style, and cultural context. Use these questions to guide your writing, citing your observations and descriptions in appropriate stylistic conventions (e.g., MLA, APA, etc.).

**1. Analyze the social media site that your author uses.**

**Purpose.** What are the basic functions of the site? What is the purpose of the site? What is it attempting to do or accomplish (invite, teach, inform, persuade, entertain, encourage reflection or introspection, scare, urge action, woo)?<sup>1</sup>

**Audience.** What is the estimated total number of users? How many are active? Passive? Who are some of the literary authors using the site? How do they use it, generally? Specifically? How do these authors identify themselves at the site? Gather any demographic and psychographic information that you can. Who is the audience for the site? Generally?

<sup>1</sup> Rhetorical questions and portfolio rubric adapted from *The 2006 Writing Teachers' Sourcebook*, edited by Dana Kinzy.

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**ASSIGNMENT SHEET** *(continued)*

Specifically? What do the participants on the site assume about their audience and how do you know?

**Genre and Style.** What genres of writing does the site feature? What types of media are native to the site—text, video, audio, photo? What isn't on this site? What types of analytics or marketing tools are available on this site? What composing style does the site use? What is its design? What niche does the site fill? What activities show this? When listening to or reading conversations on the site, ask yourself, what is the style of this communication? What persona, manner, spirit, or tone does the social media site project and use to attract an audience?

**Cultural Context.** What is the cultural context of the site? Why was the site constructed? What do you know or what can you learn about this site by examining the context in which it occurs—physically, historically, socially, geographically? One way to understand a site's cultural context is by comparing the site to other social media sites. On what other sites might similar information be found? Why? On what sites would it be very unlikely or never be found? Why?

**2. Analyze your author's use of the social media site.**

**Purpose.** What do you believe is the author's purpose for using the site? What does she/he attempt to do or accomplish (invite, teach, inform, persuade, entertain, encourage reflection or introspection, scare, urge action, woo)? What do you think your author's main goals are in using the site? What topics or ideas seem to be the author's main concern? How does your author's approach compare with and/or connect to other authors you've read?

**Audience.** What is your author's point of view? What does the author assume about his or her audience and how do you know? How does this audience influence the rhetoric (style of writing, etc.) that the author uses? What is the relationship between author and audience on this site? Where do you see these influences in the descriptions and observations you've collected? Where and how does the writer of the text establish authority in relation to the audience? What kinds of groups/functions do authors have on this site?

**Genre and Style.** What writing genres does your author seem to prefer or embrace on the site? What types of media does the author use (text, video, audio, photo)? What doesn't your author use on this site? What types of analytics or marketing tools has the author chosen to include on this site? What style does the author write in? What niche does the author's social media activity seem to fill? What activities show this? When reading the author's posts, notice the style of communication she/he uses. What persona, manner, spirit, or tone does the author project in order to draw

in an audience and other participants? Do you see any recurring themes or discontinuities in your author's point of view?

**Cultural Context.** What do you know or what can you learn about this author by examining the cultural context in which she/he is using this social media — physically, historically, socially, geographically? Why is the author using this social network rather than another? Where else does the author post content on the Internet (e.g., personal Web site, blog, other social networking sites)? Is the content the same? Different? Why?

### 3. Reflect on and analyze your participation as a writer and reader at the site.

**Rhetorical Analysis.** Based on your analysis and experience with this social network for this assignment, describe what suggestions you have for participants, including authors and publishers, who might just be getting started on this network. What groups did you join, follow, or participate in? What was your role as a user? Would you have done anything differently? How can this network integrate with other media (e.g., e-books, books, journals, other networks, e-mail)? Describe your sense of your own use in terms of audience, purpose, cultural context, and genre and style.

#### **Emotional Reaction, Intellectual Reaction, and Response as a Writer/Participant.**

*Emotional:* How did engaging on this site make you feel? Were there posts that made you feel left out — either because the vocabulary was difficult or the ideas were new or the authors/users were assuming knowledge about events, ideas, or theories that were unfamiliar to you? Does your engagement at the site remind you of other experiences? What do you already know that can contribute to your understanding of this site? How are the ideas in this site or the style of writing different from what you already know or have experienced online on other networks?

*Intellectual:* What ideas came to mind as you engaged at the site? What questions does this raise about you, other humans, life, the state of the world, the relationship between participant readers and writers, social media, and technology, and so on?

*Writer/Participant:* What did you notice about the way posts were written, the choices your author, you, and other users made in terms of details, organization, voice, point of view, argument? What appeals to you about the style of the site and the posts? What does not?

**Reflection.** What do you feel has been most and least effective in your experience on the site? What is your assessment of the responses you've received to your posts? What would you have done differently? What do you understand better about yourself as a writer and a user of social media? What have you learned about your literary author and your own writing through this assignment? What writing issues would you like to

(continued)

**ASSIGNMENT SHEET** *(continued)*

continue examining or learning about in the remainder of the semester?  
What roles have you played on the site and in your peer workshopping group for this assignment? What is your assessment of your overall participation in this assignment, in your peer group, and in the class so far?  
What areas do you plan to improve on for the remainder of the semester?

**Part 3. Finalize your essay, organize your appendix of screenshots, assemble your portfolio, and create and give a presentation.**

In Part 3 of this assignment you will:

1. Draft, workshop, and revise your essay. Make sure that in your essay you draw on five (5) sources and include an annotated MLA bibliography.
2. Create and share with the class a 5- to 7-minute PowerPoint presentation.

**PROJECT CHECKLIST:**

- All in-class/prewriting and brainstorming (untyped)
- Draft 1 of 4 with author's note, Track Changes off, 3–4 pages, 2 annotated sources for MLA bibliography
- Workshop comments and edits from peers
- In-class revision work of draft 2 of 4, Track Changes on with author's editing notes in comment bubbles, 5–6 pages, 4 annotated sources for MLA bibliography
- Workshop comments and edits from peers
- Peer response letter
- Draft 3 of 4, Track Changes on with author's editing notes in comment bubbles, 7–8 pages, 5 annotated sources for MLA bibliography
- Workshop comments and edits from peers
- In-class revision work
- Appendices beyond the final essay
- Screenshot of your profile with relevant information
- 5 relevant posts you made
- 3 additional examples of your interactions with others
- Screenshot of your case study author's profile
- 5 examples of relevant posts the author made
- 5 additional examples of the author's interactions with others
- Other charts, graphs, or other visuals that support your findings



## 4. TIME AND TECHNOLOGY

**TIME.** The assignment asks students to participate on a social media site of their choice as they follow an author over six weeks and work through at least four drafts of a paper documenting their findings, reflections, and analyses. First, students research and select an author using a social network during the first week. We are actively involved with the selection process to ensure that students choose well. We encourage students to look for an author who frequently posts content, is a member of several social networks, and has many active followers. Students submit their authors and social networks for approval, also during the first week of the assignment. Once approved, students begin following their author on social media, participate on the site, reflect on their interactions, and evaluate their site rhetorically (purpose, audience, genre and style, and cultural context).

Second, we build all class readings, materials, discussions, and workshops around the goals of the assignment. For example, during week two and week three we offer guided, in-class writing on what students are noticing rhetorically on their site. During week three we engage in small and large group discussions about determining, and thus narrowing down, an audience, gauging the cultural context, and exploring the site's purpose as students draft their paper. The in-class writing, discussions, workshops, and sharing build a collective knowledge that gives students the opportunity to relate their peers' findings to their own during weeks four and five. After a final workshop during week five or six, students conclude the assignment in week six by giving a five- to seven-minute presentation of their portfolio on the day it's due.

Though this assignment is designed for a six-week time period, other versions could be developed to fit the needs of a particular course or focus.

**Example 1:** Ask for an analysis of a specific aspect of rhetorical use (e.g., purpose, audience, genre and style, and cultural context). Such an assignment may ask students to write a one- to two-page analysis of a given aspect of a social network site or an author's use of that site.

**Example 2:** Run an analysis as an in-class activity. Use small groups to discuss purpose, audience, genre and style, and cultural context, then share findings as a class. This approach is simply an overview to introduce how authors use social media as a marketing platform.

Such activities may be a preparatory assignment for analyzing the rhetoric in other social settings and/or other historical time periods.

**TECHNOLOGY.** The structure of the assignment is flexible, giving you the ability to integrate it into your course schedule. This section outlines the technology needed and provides examples of different time frames for activities.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, students will need a computer or smartphone with Internet access.

Students will also need a flexible list of social media sites and literary authors. You could develop a list of networks and/or authors, perhaps drawing on sources used by past students. You could also conduct a class discussion, asking students to generate a list, and/or ask students to suggest other sites not on the list. We encourage our students to think about their reading and writing interests and the authors they admire. For example, a Harry Potter fan might enjoy exploring Pottermore, whereas a vampire series addict might benefit from analyzing Goodreads. For students who find their own social network and author, it is important to have them present a quick analysis to check that enough material is available to complete the project. We recommend looking at the number of posts, examples, and interactivity with followers as a baseline for students to consider when choosing an author and corresponding social media site.

## 5. ANTICIPATING STUDENT NEEDS

The majority of students arrive in class already using social media. They may have more digital expertise than their instructors, a situation that allows for a decentralized classroom. Feminist pedagogy often works to decenter the classroom, to question power structures, and to challenge traditional teaching models, including refocusing attention onto students themselves to see what they know, what new knowledge they bring to the classroom, and what excites them about reading and writing. bell hooks writes, “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (8).

Activities, such as this one, shift the authority from you to the student and offer an exciting place to learn together about contemporary uses of media by authors and readers. As Mary Rose O’Reilly says in *The Peaceable Classroom*, “For the teacher, it is terrifying to cede control . . . yet I believe that by giving students their autonomy we win our own. We expect our student to ‘change’ in the course of a semester. If we ourselves are not changing, I suspect we are not permitting ourselves to be put at risk by our students” (30).

In one of his courses, Adam Wagler (coauthor of this chapter) offered students the option to create mood boards using Pinterest. At the time, Pinterest was relatively new and potential users needed to be invited to use it. In class, Wagler asked students who were already on Pinterest to invite and help those who wanted to learn about and use the site to create their mood boards. In no time, a handful of heavy Pinterest users were jumping around class inviting classmates and teaching each other how to use the site. This was not only a learning experience for the students, but also for Wagler,

which would not have been possible without allowing students to share their expertise.

It's also beneficial to define for students the terms *author* and *social media* at the outset. In the assignment, we defined an author as one who has published book(s) (e.g., chapbooks, e-books, self-published, small press, or commercial press), one who is alive, and one who uses social media to promote his/her work. We defined social media as a site where all visitors have the opportunity to engage, post content, create a profile, and interact with other users. Students generate a list of their favorite authors and the social media sites they use regularly. We also discuss sites not usually noted by students where readers and writers interact (e.g., LibraryThing, Goodreads).

Additionally, it can be helpful to do an activity at the beginning of the assignment that physically separates students from their technology. For example, for Valentine's Day, Laura Wiseman (coauthor of this chapter) began a class by asking students to line up all their devices (e.g., smartphones, laptops, tablets) on the table at the front of the classroom. Students returned to their desks and wrote love poems or anti-love poems to their devices. They then shared what they'd written. For the entire period, their devices remained on the front table while they talked through an article on social media. During the last twenty minutes of the period, students were asked to write about the experience of being separated from their devices and the Internet, and to share their writing with the class, which led to a thoughtful discussion.

## 6. ASSESSMENT TOOLS

To encourage deep student engagement with a social media site, this assignment requires students to create a profile, post content, and interact with others at the site while following their chosen literary author. The paper and presentation require students to create a PowerPoint and an appendix that showcase their engagement and participation, their author case studies, research, and reflection on their (and their author's) media and rhetorical literacy.

We use a checklist (see the Assignment Sheet on p. 10) to note what items may be missing or incomplete in the portfolio. We also use the following portfolio rubric.

<b>RUBRIC for Evaluating Student Portfolios</b>		(50 points total)
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Polished Prose (8–10 pages)</b></p> <p>Uses of rhetorical concepts? Writes in genres? Thoughtful analysis of social network? Experiments with new structures and genres? Avoids clichés? Uses new and interesting word choice? Showing and telling?</p> <p>Does the final essay display a coherent and original (creative!) argument with a clear introduction, thesis, and conclusion and a well-organized body with a balance between argumentative points and textual illustrations? Does it articulate a clear audience, purpose, and context for the project? Does it develop an idea, explore a significant question, or make a point about the topic through the strategic use of detailed descriptions and careful analyses? Is the writing — punctuation, spelling, sentence structure — of excellent quality?</p>	____/10	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Revision/Writing Process</b></p> <p>Has the student reevaluated, reworked, and developed the project fully? Has he/she applied writing techniques and concepts discussed in class? Are all the workshop drafts here? Does the student engage with revision suggestions from peers and instructor? Does the student fix errors in paper drafts? Does the portfolio contain all in-class, out of class, pre- and brainstorming writings that lead up to the final paper? Is Track Changes used?</p> <p>Does the student's author's note and comment bubbles outline what was taught in class? Does he/she point to examples to support claims made? Has the student thought about his/her writing process? Shown examples of progress? Identified strengths? Weaknesses? Articulated why revisions were made?</p>	____/10	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Research and Stylistic Conventions</b></p> <p>Is the use of research apparent in the student's work? Is the research thorough, well done, and thought out? Is the research applicable to the essay's topic? Are social media artifacts used appropriately? Does the essay focus around some central idea/question that grows out of the research? Does it describe this research and artifacts? Does it include an appendix, when appropriate (posts, charts, followers, visuals, graphics, etc.)? Are there appendices that include 5 relevant posts made by the student, 3 additional examples of interactions with others, 5 examples of relevant posts the author made, 5 additional examples of the author's interactions with others, other charts/graphs/visuals that support the student's findings? Is there an annotated MLA bibliography with at least 5 sources? Does the annotated bibliography follow MLA formatting on the works-cited page and within the paper?</p>	____/10	

<b>Follows Assignment and Organization</b>	____/10
Is the student's portfolio organized? Is it neatly done and structured in a logical, organized fashion? Does it show focus and attention to detail and precise language that involves showing, not telling? Does it demonstrate that the student has applied knowledge of style and skillful language? Does it meet assignment requirements? Is it 8–10 pages? Are the grammar and mechanics consistent? Has it been proofed? Does it avoid passive voice and forms of "to be"?	
<b>Final Presentation</b>	____/10
Does the final presentation show poise, maturity, and practice? Does the 5- to 7-minute PowerPoint presentation demonstrate the writer's research? Does it show her/his writing process? Does it give examples of revision and a writer's strategies?	
<b>Total</b>	____/50

## 7. THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE ASSIGNMENT: Shaking the Magic 8 Ball: Social Media for Readers and Writers

After my [Laura Madeline Wiseman's] sister's wedding, family gathered at the newlyweds' brick home under a canopy of established elm, oak, and pine. Between cake and photo ops, we nibbled pineapple, green grapes, and strawberries. When conversation lagged or someone's squalling child was sequestered with teat and clean diapers in a back bedroom, I watched my other, younger sister and her husband with their mobile phones, those black plastic boxes they cradled in one hand, a finger sweeping blithely over the shiny surface or two thumbs tapping and reaching as it dimmed and flashed before them. I watched their eyes, the glitter of the small box reflected there. I watched their faces, their skin, as they read—a crinkled brow, a clucked tongue, a gentle snorting laugh, more puff of air than sound escaping. I watched the ease of their shoulders, the shift of weight as they leaned back in their chair. I didn't have a mobile phone with a data plan. I had a cell phone, of course, and at home, a laptop, but how strange I thought—those black boxes of light and words, like a Magic 8 Ball. You shake it and answers rise to the surface from that swirling, purple-black water. You read, consider, and shake it again.

A year earlier, we [the coauthors of this chapter] led a study abroad to Russia and encountered the same thing—students with tablets and

smartphones, eyes bright and intent with the flicker from their screens. Behind them, unseen, was the red-walled fortress of the Kremlin, topped with jeweled and glowing red stars. We'd also seen this at academic conferences in Chicago, D.C., and Toronto — a hotel lobby swimming with dresses and suits, expensive haircuts and muted leather loafers, fingers communing with small black boxes in the roar of conversation, a white noise in which to meditate. And we'd seen this in our classrooms, the furtive thumbs and sleek, plastic boxes between the jeaned thighs of students, mid-class — assignments and notebooks open on their desks, yes, but below their desks, that Magic 8 Ball summoning the real answers they sought. And it is here that this assignment came to be and rose from the darkness to light, because we wanted to know why.

In a recent issue of *Poets & Writers*, Jami Attenberg offers tips for writers who use social media. In her article, “Network: How to Use Tumblr to Connect With Readers,” Attenberg writes, “A savvy young friend of mine pushed me to launch a Tumblr page because my fourth book was coming out and she believed it would expose me to a new audience. . . . [Now] I have close to two thousand followers” (79). Many writers are using social media to connect. In the United States, 275,000 books are published annually, with self-published/e-books at 765,000 (Goldfarb 53). In “What Writers Need to Know About Electronic Publishing,” Ronald Goldfarb writes, “A year ago, there were fifteen million electronic readers; today they number forty million. . . . [In 2009] electronic publishing comprised about 3% of all new books; today it is 15% and it has been predicted . . . by 2020, it will be as much as 50%” (53–54). Given the growth of e-publishing and new media, social media provides a powerful pedagogical space, in part because our students are already using it to connect, research, and write. Eighty-seven percent of Internet users, ages 18–29, use online social networking sites (Purcell, slide 10). If writers are using social media and if our students are too, than how does a teacher incorporate social media into the goals, aims, and scope of their classroom?

Wait, maybe we should back up. Both of us grew up in a pre-Internet world. We both went to college when e-mail and the Internet were in its infancy, the time when Web sites were static pages of information. We both have watched the evolution of the Internet to platforms where people interact in virtual communities. Facebook, where we both have pages, is still the largest social network (Experian) with 1.15 billion active users as of June 2013 (Facebook). Denis McQuail defines social media participation as “two-way and interactive” forms of speaking, writing, and communicating that are integral to its appeal (542). As Kim Sheehan and Deborah Morrison note, such “interactive creativity is built around engagement, and it recognizes that people are inherently social and look to create and maintain relations” (41). Compare new media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Google+) that use the new communication model of individual messages, personal-

ized responses, and audience participation to traditional media outlets (e.g., NPR, *The New York Times*, local news broadcasts) that use numerous communication models and one has a curious conundrum. If traditional media outlets and new media outlets are using different means of engagement, how do students view these sites? Are they doing so rhetorically? Critically? Can media be studied in the English classroom, especially given that authors and readers are using social media at least at the rate of the students we teach?

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes: “One way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice” (40). In our teaching a shared goal is to create a classroom community that will generate excitement about the course material; we do this by listening to—and teaching students to listen to—the ways community members speak, with a focus on rhetorical concepts. In such a community, we stress that each individual rhetorical voice adds to the conversation. Assignments such as the one we’ve presented in this chapter (see p. 6), round-robin activities that ask students to share observations, peer review sessions that get students to share constrictive criticism—all of these contribute to create a space where students can learn, appreciate, and think critically about various viewpoints, ideas, and arguments. Any assignments that ask students to think critically and to consider rhetorical strategies improves student writing. The National Writing Project suggests the following:

An effective writing assignment does more than ask students to write about what they have read or experienced. It engages students in a series of cognitive processes, such as reflection, analysis, and synthesis, so that they are required to transform the information from the reading material in order to complete the writing assignment. (47)

Social media creates a learning environment where students can interact with other readers and writers and with each other in and beyond the classroom as they discuss and analyze their experiences. Teaching students to think critically about their surroundings, their popular culture consumption, and their social media habits helps them to become savvier citizens, thinkers, and learners. In *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky writes, “It’s when a technology becomes normal, then ubiquitous, and finally so pervasive as to be invisible, that the really profound changes happen, and for young people today, our new social tools have passed normal and are heading to ubiquitous, and invisible is coming” (105). If social media is not invisible yet, then as teachers we have an opportunity to encourage students to critically investigate social media by creating assignments that are framed around social media and the goals of our classes. Many students are experienced social media users, but it’s likely that few have thought about social media as a professional communication tool. The ubiquity of technology in the classroom makes this an



exciting place for us and our students to focus on thoughtful, critical, and analytical inquiries.

This assignment challenges students to reflect as they analyze their own use of social media. It prompts them to learn more about the authors they already admire and to discover new ones. Most importantly, it asks students to apply rhetorical analysis over several weeks in a researched essay that is workshopped and peer-edited. Taught in a composition course, this assignment fulfills, in part, the aims and scope that ask students to produce twenty-five pages of polished prose by the end of the course. Workshopping the assignment allows students to think through their ideas by learning from their classmates as they develop skills in revision, argument, and peer feedback.

### Recommended Scholarship on Social Media

“Generation Why?” from the New York Review of Books by Zadie Smith offers a critical look at how Facebook and technology are shaping a generation.

*Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* by Clay Shirky explores how traditional forms of communication and media are changing by people connecting, collaborating, and organizing online.

Mashable ([mashable.com](http://mashable.com)) is a news source that covers social media and provides current information, trends, tips, tricks, and how-tos. For example, the article by Leyl Master Black looks at “5 Low-Cost Social Media Marketing Strategies for Authors.”

*Poets & Writers* runs “The Practical Writer” series on “Network” offering tips for writers getting started on social media. For example, the November/December 2011 issue focuses on LinkedIn. They also feature pieces such as Lauren Cerand’s “Social Media for Authors” and the interview “A Social Approach” with Richard Nash by Gabriel Cohen on [Redlemona.de](http://Redlemona.de).

## 8. CONCLUSION

When I [Laura Madeline Wiseman] was in middle school, I had a Magic 8 Ball. As I did with other fortune-seeking tools—Ouija Board, tarot cards, horoscopes, and palm readers at the fair—I asked questions hoping some truth would float up from the inky nebula. Later, I had a computer, a large charcoal metal box with a black screen, ghoulish letters, and a blinking green cursor. When I saved something on a floppy disk or opened up a file, it churned and grunted like it was engraving silver. Today I have an iPad, and as a writer, I use social media and follow my peers and the writers and



literary authors I admire. I'm not sure what I'm searching for as I tap my screen or sweep a finger to scroll through the recent tweets, but I do know that I feel a sense of community, a connection to what's going on in the literary world, and an astonishment at what other writers and my students teach me about social media.

The assignment presented here (beginning on p. 6) provides an opportunity for you and your students to investigate current ways that authors, presses, journals, and readers are using new technologies to communicate, discuss, and explore literature. Through the rhetorical analysis of social media, this assignment builds new knowledge in the classroom by offering a snapshot of what is happening in digital reading and writing communities and gives students the tools to critically think and become rhetorically savvy as they consume and produce content in an online, social environment. Future iterations of this assignment could develop an online course wiki from student work, potentially connecting multiple sections or other courses (e.g., creative writing, literature, journalism). I am no soothsayer. I have no smartphone, no Magic 8 Ball, but what an opportunity we have to shake up social media, to shake up our classrooms and see what truths float to the surface, bright and buoyant and filled with the exuberance of student insight.

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