

What is Hypertext? Constructing a Theoretical Framework

Defined simply, hypertext is digital text with hyperlinks. Hypertext may be further categorized into two broad groups: informational hypertext like the Encyclopedia Britannica Online or narrative/literary hypertext like the novel *Victory Garden* by Stuart Moulthrop. Early hypertext was published on CD ROM. Today, it is often published on the World Wide Web. The Web itself may be considered the meta-hypertext, since it is a collection of interconnected documents.

The hyperlink is the definitive feature of hypertext. Aficionados argue that hyperlinks make hypertext less linear, less stable, and less determinate than non-digital mediums. By allowing readers to choose their own pathways through interconnected chunks of text (lexias), hypertext arguably turns readers into co-writers (or wreaders). The end result is a radically different form of literary discourse that blurs the lines between reader and writers and undermines conventional narrative elements such as a linear plot and consistent perspective.

More traditionally minded critics think that the codex medium (the book) has already accomplished what hypertext claims to originate. They cite modern and post-modern literary works that experiment with non-linearity and multiple perspectives, such as *The Sound and the Fury* or *Ulysses*. Furthermore, they suggest that the traditional reader already co-produces meaning by contributing their individual experiences to works and by following particular pathways through literary texts.

How Can I Use Hypertext? Starting Ideas for English Language Arts Teachers

Discussions of hypertext are marked by the rhetoric of reinvention, asking us to rethink what we believe about writers, texts, and readers. As English language arts teachers, we are ultimately more interested in using technology to reinforce what we already practice: effective reading and writing instruction.

English teachers interested in using hypertext in their own classroom may discover that hypertext is most useful as a writing tool. More specifically, hypertext supports best practice writing principles by offering students:

- a real audience of peers, parents, and the public
- an opportunity to publish
- a rhetorical space to develop their own voices
- an environment for collaborative writing

Additionally, since hypertext functions on the principle of association, hypertext writing is ideally suited to literary genres that emphasize association. Arguably, this makes evocative poetry, short sketches, and vignettes the best hypertextual genres.

How Does it Work? Creating Your Own Hypertext Project

1. Permission. If your hypertext project will be published on the Web, be sure to get permission from your administration, parents, and students. For security, you might remind students to avoid including their address and phone number in their pieces.
2. Server space. You will need a place to publish your hypertext project. Hypertext can be published on your local intranet, but this lessens its impact, since students cannot show off their work from computers outside of school. Space is available on commercial servers like Yahoo GeoCities, Angelfire, or Homestead, but you have to put up with banner ads. I recommend requesting server space from your technology system administrator. Additionally, most universities offer free server space to enrolled students.
3. Software. You and your students do not need special software to write hypertext. Microsoft Word allows students to include hyperlinks in their documents, save their documents in .html format, and publish to a Web location.

Day One: Laying the Groundwork

In the computer lab, students use Microsoft Word to type two vignettes. Students should save these documents as .htm files in a specially designated folder, which will later be moved to the Web server. It is very important that students save their documents with recognizable names, since this makes hyperlinking easier later on. Try lastname1.htm and lastname2.htm. Lastly, students print hard copies of their vignettes.

Day Two: Making Connections

In class, students connect their own vignettes to those of others by theme, subject, tone, genre, or another element. Students record these connections on a separate piece of paper, explaining how their connections work and suggesting a possible linking word for each connection (e.g. hair). Note: it is very important that each vignette connects to at least two different other vignettes.

Day Three: Adding Hyperlinks and Publishing

Back in the computer lab, students use Microsoft word to insert hyperlinks into their saved vignettes. This is an easy process: a student simply highlights a word, selects the link icon, and then searches for the name of the vignette (e.g. jones2) to which she wants to link. When this process is finished, all of the vignettes in the folder should be interconnected. Now, you just need to move that folder to your server space.

You might also design a home base (or index page) for the project. This page should explain the project and offer a few starting threads for interested readers to follow. See the Mango Project Web site (<http://faculty.gvsu.edu/rozemar/mangoweb>) for an example.

Day Four: Reading and Responding

Starting with their own vignettes, students follow hypertext threads to read and respond to other pieces. This allows students a chance to see what they have created.