

# Rhetoric & Media Studies

## A Text is a Text, is a Text? A Brief F.A.Q.<sup>1</sup>

### What is a text?

A text is a combination of **signs** that make use or borrow from one or more **codes** in order to put together, "construct," a message. Hence, a text is an entity constructed from various other sources, elements, or other entities.

### But, what is a "code?"

A code is a **system** of signs that has a particular structure, function, and specific usage features. The following are codes: language, music, and **gestures**. If you know the code, you can construct specific and appropriate messages with that code. Think of how much we struggle when we first learn to speak another language. We find it difficult to put together sentences and carry a conversation because we are not yet well versed in that language or code. It gets more complicated. When we speak we use not only a language code, but also nonverbal codes, and gestural codes. Like language codes, these non-verbal and gestural codes vary according to culture. As a result, the messages that we try to convey are a patchwork, a quilt, something "woven together" from various codes. Those weavings are called a \*text\*

### What are examples of texts?

When you write a speech, letter, or opinion piece for the local newspaper you compose a text. Texts can also be poems and musical compositions. When you write any of these you create texts. Don't forget that texts are context-specific. That is, their meaning, as with any other message, may vary depending on the situation or context, channels used for their dissemination, culture, and so forth. In a larger sense, text refers to larger messages, not just to the physical object you produce. For instance, if you see a movie (i.e., 2001 Space Odyssey), the text is not necessarily the film script. The text is a larger entity composed of the various elements brought together to create the "film." These elements might include musical score, special effects, imagery, and more. When we watch the film, we don't follow along with a script to determine meaning. We can say a text is created through the images, the sounds, the words, the acting, etc. When we try to interpret that film, and perhaps explain it to a friend, we are "reading" that particular text.

### How are texts put together?

Good question. The quick answer is: *quite probably in an infinite variety of ways*. As a combination of elements a text is an **instantiation** of various **meaning making resources in our culture**. These meaning making resources include semantic, syntactic and lexical features of language, cultural values, social expectations or norms, and formal or **generic conventions**. For instance, when you write a eulogy you compose a text that relies on cultural norms (what is appropriate to say), language meaning-making resources (how to select proper vocabulary and construct sentences that express grief), and generic conventions that dictate what "form" eulogies are supposed to follow (somber tone, praise the deceased). Those generic conventions are what tell you that what you are listening to is a eulogy instead of a commencement address. An example of a cultural meaning-making resource is our predilection in the United States to read from left to right, starting at the uppermost left hand corner of the page. Another cultural meaning-making resource is our assumption about U.S. cultural superiority. For example, that everybody wants what we produce, or that we are blessed by a divine power (God bless America, God has called us to be beacons of liberty, our Manifest Destiny), and so forth. As you can see, texts combine various elements (syntactic, semantic, lexical, & other cultural conventions) into one entity, we definitely notice that texts have a particular unity. As a result, we can recognize what a text is, and we can "read" them.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted partially to Glenn F. Stillar for a wonderful explanation of text and discourse in: *Analyzing Everyday Texts: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Social Perspectives* (London: Sage Publications, 1998); and to Marcel Danesi and Paul Perron, *Analyzing Cultures* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999) for an excellent description of the semiotics of culture.

## Will any combination of elements make a text?

Texts are not put together “willy-nilly.” Purpose, intention, assumptions about audiences, and the expectations of those who put together a particular text all go into the **construction** process. In addition, understandings of context also are essential to text making. Let’s see an extended example:

Imagine you need to create a web page. In order to create that page you select language that you want to use as content, and images to add graphical distinction to the page. You may also select a color scheme for other graphical elements, including the background. If you are a daring type, you may even include sound effects, and effects created through a scripting language such as Javascript or Perl. Notice that you will most likely follow some standard form for how people access the page, and how they interact with the page. For example, they will likely start to read the page at the top and scroll down as they need or want to see more. Throw in a few links of sites you like and voila! you are almost done. Moreover, good web design requires that you make your page conform to certain minimal standards so that it displays properly on various browsers and computing platforms. We can go further and note that you could have also selected a descriptive name not only for the page but also for the location where it can be found.

This completed web page will be your text. Notice the meaning making resources you have selected and combined to make a coherent unity (linguistic, graphic, color, audio, cultural, social). If you selected a domain name for the page (i.e., [www.curlyfries.com](http://www.curlyfries.com)), you have also contributed to how others will not only find it, but also how they **frame** their encounter with the page (text). The links you included also help define your page and you, its creator. An important thing to remember here is that, as with the film example, the text you have put together is not the HTML code behind the page.

## The Authoring of Texts

So far we’ve talked about text creation as if it was solely an intentional process. In other words, we’ve been talking as if texts had a person behind them pulling all the strings. Yet, texts don’t necessarily have to feature an individual as creator and “manager.” As critics we also make determinations as to what counts as a social text, what set of meaning-making resources connect to instantiate a body of meaning(s) in society. Hence, when critics speak of reading something as a text, we mean a process of discerning and interpreting a collection of meaning-making resources articulated in such a way that provides a particular unity of signification. When these are fairly well delimited instantiations we refer to them as a text, or texts. When those articulations are larger, overlapping or crossing various social domains and/or institutions we call them discourse(s), such as say “political discourse,” or “feminist discourse.”

In the handout titled *Semiosis and Culture* I provide an example that might help us understand how a text is not necessarily directly authored. I’ve modified it here somewhat:

In a larger sense, texts can refer also to larger messages, not just to the physical object you produce. For instance, if you watch a movie (e.g., *Chasing Amy*), the text is not necessarily the film script authored by the screenwriter, nor the book on which the film may be based. When we watch the film, we don't follow a script, and read along to determine meaning. We can say a text is created through the images, the sounds, the words, the acting, editing choices, all these elements coming together into a unity of signification.

## Fragmentation, Articulation, Circulation, and Connection

Of great importance also are circulation (how texts circulate in social networks), fragmentation (what bits and pieces of texts circulate, and how texts are fragmented for easy reproduction and dissemination), articulation (what new combinations can be produced by joining different fragments of texts), and connection (how texts facilitate interconnection).

Hence, not just any combination of elements make a text, but we as symbol using creatures can impart and discern meaning to quite varied combinations of **symbolic elements**. As Rhetorical Critic Glenn F. Stillar

has put it, "Text not only is 'woven together' itself but also weaves us together" (The metaphor is not far from the mark because the Latin root of the word text means to weave, plait, braid, and bring together). We produce, read, and exchange texts with other human beings. Such exchanges constitute **communicative action** that can bring us together, reduce ambiguity, define problems, or have quite opposite effects.

The last statement brings us to a most important point for the student of rhetorical criticism. It will be of critical importance to justify your selection of text(s) by explaining why it is (or are) **significant**.