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Television: The Best Multimodal Medium

The relationship between my time on Earth, so far, and the number of books I have read outside of a classroom can be graphed as an inverse function. As I have grown older, I have leaned more towards Calculus and Chemistry. And even as an early adolescent, I felt more gifted when I received an A on a Geometry test that I did not study for, rather than when I had to sit at the dinner table for an hour, just to write a few paragraphs.

With my gifts, I placed myself in a box. The type of box where I believed no matter how much I wrote, writing and reading would never be for me. Irvin describes this feeling perfectly in “What is Academic Writing?” when he talks about myths in writing. In Myth #4, he described how some people think their ability to write was predetermined in their “genetic code” (Irvin 5). But he promises that with practice and effort, you can improve as a writer. I didn’t think practicing would make me a better writer because writing is subjective. Another person my age might think my essay in English class is amazing, but someone with a PhD in English might have a different opinion.

Before I placed myself into that box, I enjoyed checking out books from the library and I had a bookshelf in my room with at least 50 books. Even if these books were mostly graphic novels and Dr. Seuss books, I was able to expand my literacy abilities. Naturally, reading a book at a 4th grade level is significantly easier than reading Othello at 13 years old in 8th grade English.

I look back at elementary school when I started the first episode of the TV show that changed how I saw literature. That show was "A Series of Unfortunate Events" (2017-2019). Originally, this show was based on a book series, which was adapted into a movie, then later turned into the show that I absolutely adore. The more I look back at it, the more references and learning experiences I realize I gained from watching this show.

The show follows the life of the three intelligent Baudelaire children after discovering that their parents have "perished in a fire" (Snicket). The main goal for the show was to place them in the hands of a suitable guardian; however, the main antagonist, Count Olaf, made sure that they were only under his control. He didn't care for the kids, only the money that their parents left behind.

I was able to learn many literary elements through the show, more specifically vocabulary. The narrator Lemony Snicket broke the fourth wall throughout the whole show and explained certain vocabulary terms to the audience. This allowed my vocabulary to grow at such a young age. An example of this would be when he explains the difference between rational and irrational fears in The Wide Window episode. Even if the majority of people my age know the difference now, these new phrases and vocabulary were shocking as a 9-year-old.



Figure 1: The Baudelaire children wearing colorful raincoats
in "The Miserable Mill: Part One"

Gagich explains the different modes of communication as "linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and aural" (67). Television generally has all 5 modes of communication. Linguistic being the script, visual is what you see on the screen, spatial is the distance between characters that usually have meaning, gestural is the actors acting using their body language, and aural being the music, sound effects, or tone used by the production team or actors during the scene.

In Figure 1, the Baudelaire children are wearing colorful raincoats that contrast with the dark and gloomy background. This figure shows the visual and spatial modes of communication and without any context, it may seem that this scene represents a sign of hope for the kids after going through many traumatic events. However, with the other modes of communication, such as the script, the music, and body language, the audience learns that Figure 1 does not show the full picture. If the audience were to watch the full episode, they would learn that the episode is called Miserable Mill for a reason.

This is one of many examples that taught me that not everything is what it seems. Being able to communicate your intentions properly is very important as a writer, and even as a TV producer. I was able to learn that I must be clear to the readers whenever I write any piece of literature, or else the readers might misunderstand my theme or goal. Like how a simple television show about 3 orphans escaping a greedy man shows more than references to literature or explanations for vocabulary.

In spite of the fact that I stayed in the box for many years after finishing this show, it still left an impression on my mind. The impression that while literature and writing is subjective in a grading manner, that only means that there is more for the readers to explore. The beauty of writing shows the multiple interpretations and meanings behind the choices the author made. Calculus and Chemistry may be easier to get to a final answer, but there is not much to dissect.

As of now, my attitude towards reading and writing is gentler than I used to view before. Mainly due to the freedom of writing and the lack of forced structure in writing, compared to how I was used to writing in high school. I enjoy being able to use personal pronouns and do not have to constantly say "one" instead. This new perspective on writing and reading has inspired me to finish reading the books I brought from home. "A Series of Unfortunate Events" will always be one of those pieces of literature that I will crawl back to, especially since it played such a big role in my childhood and my literacy development. How many 9-year-olds out in the world can understand the central theme to Anna Karenina, simply because it was the secret password to a door?

Gagich, Melanie. "Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing." *Writing Spaces*, Parlor Press, parlormultimedia.com/writingspaces/past-volumes/an-introduction-to-and-strategies-for-multimodal-composing/. Accessed 20 Sept. 2026.

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