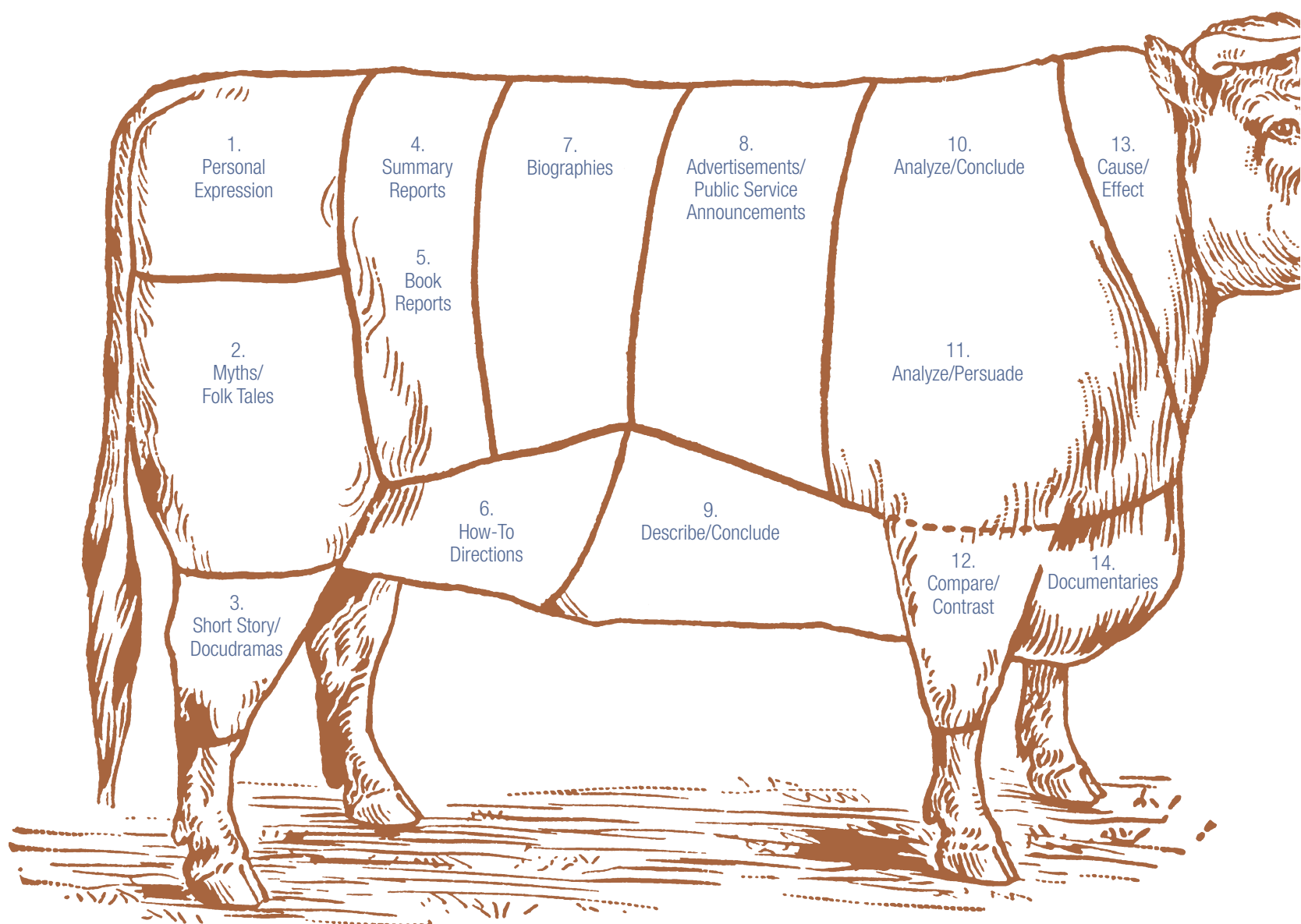


By Bernajean Porter

# WHERE'S THE BEEF?

## Adding Rigor to Student Digital Products

Are your students overly enamored with media novelties, such as flying words and spinning images? Learn how to steer them to create more robust digital projects.



### TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

NARRATIVE GENRES 1-3

INFORMATION/EXPOSITORY GENRES 4-7

PERSUASIVE GENRES 8-14

Effective communication skills start with content that is worthy of sharing. Since the expression “Where’s the Beef?” was first used as an advertising slogan for Wendy’s in 1984, it has become an all-purpose phrase questioning the substance of an idea, event, or product. Students exploring and using various technologies, unfortunately, easily become enamored by media novelties, such as flying words or spinning images, and produce digital products with no beef. Using digital tools does not make their cutting and pasting of summary information more valuable.

Mastering technology tools is no longer enough. Using digital products to demonstrate what students know and understand creates a performance task that maps with all NETS for Students and American Association for School Libraries (AASL) standards for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century learner, but only if inquiry or problem-based learning—not technology—guides students’ learning tasks.

Educators need to help students rehearse thinking, creativity, and communication skills that go beyond repackaging existing information. The need for 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills and meeting the NETS•S creates an urgent demand on learners to acquire and practice the higher-order thinking skills from the top of Bloom’s Taxonomy: analyzing, evaluating, and creating knowledge beyond existing facts.

Student work has traditionally focused on topical research. For example, students are often assigned to “go look up and report back” to demonstrate that they are good consumers of information. A book report, for example, typically expects students to distill the facts to demonstrate that they know the book. Putting that paper book report into a slide show, podcast, Animoto, movie, VoiceThread, or Comic Life does not

change the intellectual work of the content. It is still a summary report decorated with media. But asking students to create a book trailer that sells the book as a public service announcement or to create a sound track that represents the emotional journey of the storyline helps learners become knowledge producers, because they must demonstrate understanding beyond existing facts.

### Think Rigorous Content First

When you reflect on digital products in your classrooms or see student work created with technology tools at conferences, try to peer past the technology glitz and ask questions about rigor. Does the content have substance worth sharing? Are your students’ digital products demonstrating what they know and deeply understand about the topic beyond existing facts? Or are their digital products primarily demonstrating the exploration and acquisition of technology skills?

Of course you can have both quality and craftsmanship, but only if you start with rigorous content.

In 1999, in partnership with North Central Regional Lab (NCREL), I developed a comprehensive set of research-based scoring guides for digital products. We wanted evaluation tools that used a database of indicators to encourage teachers to begin their students’ digital communication products with a purpose beyond recapping facts. We also wanted an assessment process that would increase student learning rather than just monitor it—an assessment for learning.

After two years of field testing and aligning with numerous state and national standards, we created a set of 14 comprehensive scoring guides based on type of communication (see “Types of Communication,” page 14). Each type of scoring guide has detailed statements to assess nine traits for limited, developed, and exemplar qualities in digital media

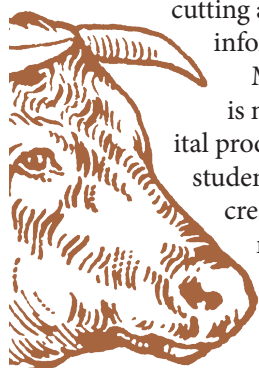
products. Traits in each scoring guide are divided into two parts: content communication and craftsmanship of communication (see “Nine Scoring Traits for Digital Products,” page 16). Educators can access an online version of these evaluation tools for personal classroom use at [www.digitales.us/evaluating/scoring\\_guide.php](http://www.digitales.us/evaluating/scoring_guide.php).

### Begin with Types of Communication

Before asking students to create multimedia products, use a flow chart that starts with clarity about the type of communication, then select the mode that best suits your purpose/audience, and finally identify the tool.

The type of communication establishes the depth of knowledge, format, and cognitive style you expect in the communication of a digital product. Suppose the topic is the Civil War. If the task is to tell about a Civil War battle, the type is a summary report, which is nothing more than new packaging of existing information. If the task is to describe/conclude, analyze/persuade, or create a docudrama, the approach demands that students demonstrate their understanding of Civil War concepts beyond existing information.

Next, authors choose a mode for their content. Mode is the packaging of the message, such as podcasting, comic books, dramatic blogs, or movies. The expectations for shaping the content would be the same regardless of the mode. Each mode influences how others experience the message. Students will need to use a variety of modes over time to develop “fluency” in each. Creating graphic novels, for example, can be technically easy, but the artful use of this mode requires an understanding that each panel needs to express a defined emphasis, that images traditionally include dramatic perspectives, or that the number of panels used creates different emotional experiences with the story line. We want authors to master maximizing



## NINE SCORING TRAITS FOR DIGITAL PRODUCTS



### Content Communication

1. Preparation Process
2. Content Knowledge
3. Format/Organization

### Craftsmanship of Communication

4. Text Communication
5. Image Communication
6. Voice/Sound Communication
7. Design of Communication
8. Presentation Communication
9. Interactivity of Communication

Contrast). Students could have used GarageBand, PhotoStory, or Audacity software (tools). Whatever tools you use, putting the priority on rigor and fluency of the modes will benefit students long after tools become obsolete or new tools become available.

Allowing students to choose their own types, modes, and tools as well as to personally select the assessment indicators that you will use to evaluate their digital work increases student ownership, affinity, and independent learning skills. We want students to become designers of learning tasks and consumers of assessment information and take responsibility for using evidence of their own progress to understand what comes next for them. Using the online scoring guides easily enables learners to define and understand what success looks like and to determine how to do better next time.

### Digital Work as a Body of Evidence

The ability to validate scoring processes for digital products not only enables quality feedback on student work but also makes it possible to organize a body of evidence for data-driven schoolwide content goals. Establishing schoolwide goals for digital products across the curriculum allows all learners to rehearse the work of knowledge producers while they learn to develop substance and design communication with impact, influence, and attention. Using student scoring guides in classrooms across grade levels and content areas provides a common database for narrative and quantitative feedback while guiding teachers to target tasks with rigor.

Develop student portfolios that include digital products to create a rich field of validated data for documenting student growth. Although high-stakes tests are here to stay and provide substantial data on student achievement, many state content standards are not covered in the annual tests. Having multiple data sets



influence with various media as they artfully create information experiences that come alive for others.

Finally, authors select the digital tools to mix their messages. Available tools will vary over time by grade level, hardware platform used, and software licensed. For example, middle school students created a series of podcasts (mode) called “Then and Now: Life in Our Community” (type = Compare/

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that include actual artifacts of student work provides triangulation of learning beyond the singular state test and will expand and define patterns for a more valid and accurate picture of student success. Schools and districts can provide quality evidence to show where students are in their achievement of digital age skills, as opposed to the attainment of basic facts and skills that standardized tests assess.

### Teachers as Knowledge Creators

Knowing how to use technology tools does not necessarily support teachers transitioning from traditional text-based products to the rigor of activities and media-based tools that develop information seekers, collaborators, analyzers of credible sources, problem solvers, and effective communicators. Teachers need to create their own digital works to understand the multiple skills associated with authoring multimedia products, such as:

- Defining audience and purpose
- Documenting credible research
- Using elements of effective communication
- Writing rigorous and engaging scripts/story lines
- Designing information and media planning
- Editing audio, images, and videos
- Collaborating
- Managing projects

### Assessment for Learning

Over the past 10 years, I have conducted workshops and onsite evaluations that included digital products and consulted on grant initiatives using the scoring guides in this article. They are designed to support assessment for learning. Use them to:

- Elevate perspectives for using technology
- Shape achievement goals
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in standards

- Set the stage for a multitude of skills needed to develop successful learning environments in the digital age

I have also found that students who have crafted serious pieces of work are a lot less interested in “cluttering” up their message when designing their media products.

The student scoring guide tools and collaborative processes enable leaders to organize educators to develop more rigorous student uses of technology. And seeing achievement and learning through the lens of student work is informative, eye-opening, and fun.



*Bernajean Porter is a featured speaker, workshop guide, and facilitator at national and international events who shares strategies for using technology to rediscover and accelerate joyful learning.*

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