

George Mason University Course Syllabus

Course Title:	Writing for Artists: Graphic Design Edition
Course Code/Section:	AVT 395, Section 2
Session/Year:	Spring, 2008
Meeting:	Monday, Wednesday, 4:30–5:45 PM, Robinson A 249
Professor:	Jandos Rothstein
Contact Info:	jrothste@gmu.edu
Class information:	www.jandos.com/for students
Office Hours:	TBA, and by appointment

Course Description: This course is intended to introduce students to writing as a technique for critical analysis of graphic design artifacts, ethics, processes and theory. We will also examine writing specifically as a necessary skill, for working designers—both in translating the visual language of design and art direction for verbally-oriented clients, and as a consensus-building tool within any organization.

Objectives

1. Continuing development of exposition skills.
2. Development of writing ability as a vehicle for critical dialog on design artifacts, practice and theory.
3. Development of writing as a tool for exploring the ethical obligations of a designer, both to him or herself, and towards the broader society, fellow design professionals, clients and suppliers.
4. Development of writing skills for accomplishing common design business tasks—creation of proposals, briefs, analysis and critiques.
5. Development of critical reading and editing skills.

Attendance Policy

Lab courses are, by their nature, a dynamic educational environment. During critique periods; in the interaction of instructor and student on ongoing projects, and in free discussion of colleagues, the lab provides resources and learning opportunities that cannot be “made up” by other means. Therefore:

- Students are required to attend all class meetings, to arrive on time, and to stay for the duration of the class.
- Students arriving seven minutes or more late to class will be marked tardy. Students arriving 20 minutes or more late will be marked absent. Three tardy marks equals one absence. Students who leave before the class is dismissed will be marked absent.
- Students who accumulate three or more absences will receive a reduced or failing grade.
- There are no excused absences.

Speaker:

Students are required to attend *Details, Details, Ellen Lupton’s Design Tantrum*, Harris Theater, 7:30 pm. March 27, 2007. Students are required to blog about her talk, or (preferably) about a question they asked and she answered.

TEXT AND REFERENCES

Required:

Bierut, Michael; William Drenttel and Steven Heller, *Looking Closer* (Vol. IV), Allworth Press, New York, 2002.

Janoff, Barbara and Ruth Cash-Smith, *The Graphic Designer's Guide to Better Business Writing*, Allworth Press, New York, 2007.

Heller, Steve, *Design Literacy: Understanding Graphic Design (2nd Ed.)*, Allworth Press, New York, 2004.

Suggested:

This is an exciting time for design writing. In the last two decades graphic design has emerged as a field worthy of critical thought and historical exploration. While not every practitioner need be a scholar, a life-long examination of design through reading and writing can enrich a designer's work; and clear written and spoken communication wins clients, leads to promotions and can enhance a designer's profile in the broader professional community. The following books and web sites are recommended, both for this semester and in the years ahead.

Poynor, Rick, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Post Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 2003.

Helfand, Jessica, *Screen: Essays on Graphic Design, New Media and Visual Culture*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2001

Bringhurst, Robert, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, Hartley & Marks, Point Roberts, Washington 1992

Various, *Fresh Dialogs* (vols. 1–6), AIGA and Princeton Architectural Press, New York.

Heller, Steve and Véronique Vienne, *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, Allworth Press, New York, 2003.

Lupton, Ellen and Abbott Miller, *Design, Writing, Research*, Phaidon, New York, 1996.

Heller, Steve and Elinor Pettit, *Design Dialogues*, Allworth, New York, 1998.

Holland, DK, *Design Issues*, Allworth Press and Communication Arts, New York, 2001.

Phillips, Peter L., *Creating the Perfect Design Brief*, Allworth Press and Design Management Institute, New York, 2004.

Shapiro, Ellen, *The Graphic Designer's Guide to Clients*, Allworth Press and Graphic Artist's Guild, New York, 2003.

Periodicals

Emigre, 1984–2005, documented the graphic design profession as it was revolutionized (more than once) by technology.

Every American designer should have subscriptions to both *Print* and *Communication Arts* magazines. Both provide the latest in design and design writing—*Print* does theory and history a bit better, *CA* is more business- and advertising-oriented.

Eye and *Baseline*, are the best of the British graphic design magazines. Both quarterlies are (I say, rather) expensive but are available in Mason's periodical room. While *Eye* is ostensibly similar to *Print*, it has a more international outlook, and both both UK magazines take more of an interest in vernacular design than their American counterparts. *Baseline's* focus is typography.

Websites and Blogs (see jandos.com/resources.html for an expanded list with links)

Voice: AIGA Journal of Design <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/voice>

Design Observer <http://www.designobserver.com/>

Speak Up <http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup>

Designing Magazines <http://www.designingmagazines.com> (This is my own blog.)

Writing Intensive Course

This course fulfills the Writing-Intensive requirement in the AVT major. It does so through the 500 word critique, due February 4; the 900-word paper on the ethical and social imperatives for a graphic designer, due February 25, the 1000-word “design brief” due March 19, and the 1500-word long essay due at the last class. The essay will be completed through a draft/feedback/revision process. The first draft will be due April 2.

Student Evaluation/Methods of Assessment:

The quality of each project will be determined using the following criteria:

- Concept: Originality, creativity and effectiveness of the argument.
- Technical quality of writing, evidence of research, and careful and thoughtful writing and editing.
- Spelling, grammar, general care in manuscript preparation and presentation.

Class and University Policies:

- All projects are due at the **beginning** of class on the date assigned. Late projects will be reduced one letter grade for each week late or portion thereof. After two weeks, projects will not be accepted. The final project is due on the last day of class. No extensions will be given.
- Students in this class are bound by the Honor Code, as stated in the George Mason University Catalog. The honor code requires that the work you do as an individual be the product of your own individual synthesis or integration of ideas. (This does not prohibit collaborative work when it is approved by the instructor.) Violations must be reported to the Student Honor Council, which treats such cases very seriously. Using someone else’s words or ideas without attribution is plagiarism, a very serious Honor Code offense. Plagiarism will also result in a failing grade.
- Students must be completely prepared for class to be considered present, ie. they must have all necessary computer files and all ongoing (ungraded) projects with them. They must be current with, and prepared to discuss assigned readings.
- If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.
- Students who are in need of intensive help with grammar, structure or mechanics in their writing should make use of the services of The Writing Center, located in Robinson A116 (703-993-1200). The services of the Center are available by appointment, online and, occasionally, on a walk-in basis.
- Mason uses electronic mail to provide official information to students. Students are responsible for the content of university and class communication sent to their Mason e-mail account, and are required to activate that account and check it regularly.
- Cell phones and pagers must be turned off during class.
- Students may redo work for a higher grade if the piece was originally turned in on time. Revisions must be a substantial reconsideration of the original—not merely a correction of errors. The deadline for revised work is two weeks after return. The last project cannot be revised.

Course Outline (Subject to change)

Our time this semester will be broken into three major components: business, theory, and ethics; with one or more written projects associated with each. All written projects must be turned in as both hard copies, 12 point

text, double-spaced lines with 1" margins and as Microsoft Word files. Students will be graded for both quality and length—students can expect to be marked down if they go either over or under specified word count.

Format

Effective writing requires effective reading. Students will keep up with assigned reading, and come to class prepared to discuss the issues raised in each article or chapter. In general, we will devote one class per week to discussing readings and one class per week discussing our own writing and ideas.

Students are required to choose a partner. Your partner will serve as your content editor throughout the semester—in other words, he or she will read your first draft and respond with feedback about whether you are expressing yourself clearly, whether you are defending your ideas adequately, and whether you are being appropriately concise. Your partner may or may not be able to help you with style—use the writing center if you know you require copyediting help.

You will work with your partner outside of class, so be sure to exchange e-mail and/or phone numbers.

Blog

Students are required to make at least two weekly contributions to the class blog—www.writingfordesigners.com. Posts should average at least two paragraphs of not less than five sentences each. Blog entries must be design-related, coherent and follow standard English usage, grammar and spelling. Additionally, students are responsible for reading all entries and must weekly make **substantive** comment on at least three blog entries they did not write. Where appropriate and useful, students must illustrate their entries with images and/or links. Blog entries should follow conventions of internet writing—they should be brief, timely, and entertaining. It is my hope that the blog will become a place for Mason design students to discuss their concerns, hopes and observations about the world of design today. In that spirit, I don't want to dictate blog topics, but reserve the right to impose more specific subject requirements if it seems necessary. Suggested topics can include: thoughts on being a design student today, critiques or comments on contemporary print or web site design, reactions to design writing or criticism found on another site (or in our reading), or extensions or reevaluations of work done for class projects (in this or another design class). A blog, even one with many writers, should not revisit the same ideas in different posts published too closely to one another. If someone writes something you disagree with or wish to expand upon, the comment feature rather than a new entry is appropriate. Finally, all posts and comments should be polite, respectful, and free of personal attack, insult or profanity. Students may respond to comments in entries and the ensuing dialogs—and go back and edit or expand earlier entries if expansions are clearly marked as "updates" and edits would not change a reader's perception of the following comments. This blog will be public, and people outside of Mason will be able to comment, so students should take the same care with personal information as they would on any site.

INTRODUCTION: HOW DO WE TALK AND WRITE ABOUT DESIGN?

Week 1–3

Imagine telling a friend about a trip to DC. What did you see as you walked down the street? A tall red-brick building with a green awning? A sidewalk? An excellent restaurant you visited years before? A vacant lot? Why did you choose to describe this particular street? What did you see that was worthy of mention? Perhaps a car had been broken into and the window was smashed. You make a note to yourself not to park on that street any more.

Life is full of times when we describe what we see, smell, taste and hear using language. While we cannot give the reader or listener the same experience we had when we lived through the original—we can, with practice and by using effective descriptions and metaphors make them almost feel that they had. We can help them picture (or taste or smell) an approximation of our experience in their minds, and we can make them under-

stand how we felt or what we judged to be true about our experience. More than simply saying we “liked” or “didn’t like” an experience, with effective communication our audience can understand why we reached our positive or negative judgement, and (if we're both credible and persuasive) perhaps feel that they would have come to the same conclusion.

Consider the language used to describe the street above—Green awning, vacant lot, smashed window, all of these terms—plucked from a shared vocabulary of thousands of words that might be used to describe an avenue—evoke specific images. They provide a basis for communicating about streets in general and the theoretical street above.

But, description becomes more difficult when there isn’t a shared vocabulary—or there is, but you are not privy to it. Imagine trying to describe a circuit board, calutron, diesel engine, or other complex device with workings that are mysterious to you. Analogy can help—a circuit board looks like a tiny city, a calutron is like a giant thermos bottle—but this level of description is only useful for talking to fellow outsiders. If you had to compare two different circuit boards the “city” analogy stops being helpful because it applies equally to both. To really say something about the circuit board, you have to deal with why people care about them in the first place—function, efficiency of design, cost, reliability.

Describing the artifacts of graphic design is a lot more like discussing circuit boards than describing streets. Almost any ad, magazine page, web site, banner or sign could be said to combine type (or words) and imagery. But, such a description is of little practical value—while “a tall red brick building with a green awning” evokes a specific (though possibly inaccurate) image, “type and image” evokes nothing meaningful for a reader. An ongoing challenge for the design writer is to learn, find, or develop a vocabulary that can be enlisted to describe design in ways that will resonate with an audience. As a design student you have a head start, but there will likely be times during this class when words will fail you, and you will need to expand your vocabulary, or look for analogies outside of design to make what’s important clear. (Wine connoisseurs might describe bottles as “grassy” or “earthy”—designers also use terms adapted for their purposes—“raw,” “clean,” “techno,” etc.) It’s also likely that you will have to convert words that are in your passive vocabulary (ie words you understand but do not use) to your active vocabulary. Like circuit boards, typefaces in particular have subtle differences that are critical to their use, but for which most consumers of designed products and some designers have no vocabulary.

Description is only half the job. Words are tools writers use to inform, educate and persuade—all of these tasks come up for the working designer. You must educate clients to the value of your services and ideas, inform them of the benefit of, or harm in a particular approach, and persuade them to try something new—maybe even unique. You must frame your ideas in terms of value to your reader or listener (if they don’t perceive value, they will tune you out or stop reading). This means carefully choosing what you leave out as well as what you include. If you load your writing down with extraneous detail or observations that don’t lead up to a larger point you will lose your reader. When writing about a designed piece, the goals for that piece, and the success of the design in meeting those goals is probably of most concern to a client. Designers may be interested in learning about new approaches or ideas—“design news”—as well. (Sometimes you will know, or can guess at goals, other times you will have to research them. Question for discussion: Does an ad for Dove Soap in *Maxim* have the same goals as an ad for Dove Soap in *Cosmopolitan*?)

INTRODUCTION

Week 1: Monday: No class. Wednesday: in-class project, syllabus, blog authorization, first assignment discussed. READ: *Literacy*, 162-166, 204-206, *Janoff*, Chapter 13.

Week 2: Monday: Writing handout, Discussion of reading, Wednesday First Draft of Critique Due, Discussion. READ: *Literacy*, 29-30, 361-363, 297-300.

Week 3: Monday, discussion of reading. Wednesday: ethics assignment discussed, final critiques due. READ: *Literacy*, 303-325, 379-381, *Closer*, 4-13, 26-31.

COMPONENT 1: ETHICS

Week 3–6

Conflicts of interest, personal and design ethics; visual journalism. The last decade, with the collapse of Enron and other corporations due to fraud has brought the topic of business and work ethics to the fore. Designers and other visual communicators have not been immune. With the darkening of OJ Simpson's face on the cover of *Time* and other photo-shop malfeasance, the industry dust-up over illustrator Steve Brodner's refusal to illustrate a editorial with which he disagreed for *The Wall Street Journal*, and the publication of the First Things First manifesto, personal responsibility and ethics has been a continuing issue in design circles. While some designers believe that the graphic artist, as an instrument rather than an initiator of communications has no, or minimal responsibility for the content of his work, others believe that designers should not use their skills to advocate for a product, candidate, policy or belief that they find reprehensible. Most agree that this is not a trivial question—design has become a powerful cultural force. It's likely that (incompetent) graphic design played a decisive role in the election of George W. Bush in 2000, and graphic design has contributed to hundreds of thousands of personal bankruptcies through the marketing of sub-prime loans and high-interest consumer credit cards. Graphic design has helped sell the SUVs and AC units that have exacerbated global warming. Questions: Is visual persuasion more powerful than written persuasion? Do images make an emotional connection to consumers of advertising that is hard to fend against? Is/how much is the designer responsible for the content of his or her work product?

Most designers, at some point in their career, are asked to do a professional job they find to be morally questionable. How does the individual reconcile personal feelings with the right of the client or employer to free speech in a democratic society? What are the responsibilities of designers to other visual communicators? Can you "borrow" someone else's idea? Are you personally prepared to pay the consequences (and the possible damage to livelihood) that taking a principled stand might entail?

Assignment: Students will write no less than 1200 words on one of the following topics. The writer must respectfully explore both sides of the issue while advocating for his or her own position. Argue whichever side you personally feel is correct.

1. Should you design a political campaign for a candidate whom you feel strongly should not win?
2. Regardless, of political slant, many people feel that "attack ads" distract from important issues and lower the level of discourse in a democracy. One example of negative ads were the "Swift Boat" spots which used the stylistic vocabulary of documentary filmmaking to fraudulently suggest that John Kerry's Viet Nam war medals were unearned. Is it ethical to use design techniques to distort the truth in support of a candidate, cause or product you believe in? Is it ethical to do ads that appeal to emotion rather than intellect?
3. Ideas and styles cannot not be copyrighted (although trademarks can be infringed), is it ok to use, borrow or hire another creative professional to affect the style of someone else?
4. Consider a product that you find reprehensible—SUVs, high-heel shoes, MacMansions, gangster rap—or whatever you (dis)like. Your boss tells you that you are responsible for creating ads that sell that product. What do you do and why? Can or should you justify designing ads for something you think there's too much of?
5. You are design director of a news-magazine. The editor has said that the only available photo for the cover, a portrait of a suspected killer—makes him look too nice. Is it ok to alter that photo? If not, would photo manipulation be ok at a non-news magazine, such as a woman's fashion publication?
6. Design software licenses—including font licenses—are usually very strict. Generally, software must be used by one person on at most two computers. However, as a student, you

may not have the money for all the software you need, and after graduation, you will probably buy or work for a company that owns legal copies. Is it ever ok to bootleg software?

Week 4 Monday, Wednesday: Discussion of Reading READ: *Closer*, 57-65, 101-113.

Week 5 Monday, Wednesday Discussion of reading, starting to look for a redesign project, READ: *Closer*, 181-192, 190-199.

Week 6 **Monday February 25: Ethics assignment due**, Review of papers. Wednesday, introduction of business assignment, continuing review of papers.
READ: *Closer*, 270-273, 278-280.

Week 7–10

Design Proposal. The written business proposal, along with letters, contracts, e-mails, presentations and critiques are facts of life for visual communicators. Effective writing becomes an increasingly important skill as designers progress in their careers—most new business starts with a proposal and quote—which are written by design firm owners and senior managers. Proposals may also be prepared for “in-house clients,” but are most often used as a means of gaining new business—as part of a pitch to a new or existing client, or in response to an R.f.P. (request for proposal)—a general casting call to which many designers and firms may respond. While all proposals are different, they share common features. The proposal likely summarizes the needs of the project and analyzes the current piece (in the case of a revision) with observations about how well the current version works. The heart of the proposal is a discussion of what an effective solution might accomplish, and how design, imagery and words might be used to achieve that result. Proposals are **goals-oriented** they rarely discuss aesthetics in more than general terms or color, typefaces and paper at all. Many proposals also have a cost estimate based on parameters outlined in the proposal or project requirements and a payment schedule. There is also a cover letter which thanks the client, summarizes major points of the proposal, and summarizes specific qualifications of designer for the work in question. Some proposals include a visual component.

Assignment: prepare a proposal for the brochure, magazine or other printed piece you have found that needs a redesign. Package must introduce the topic through a description of the project, (300 words), an analysis/critique of the existing piece (300 words), and a discussion what a revision would accomplish and why. (500 words) Your package should also include a price estimate (based on a real quote— from a local commercial printer—**not** an internet or quick printing service such as Kinkos, Staples or a campus service) Students will also write a cover letter of approximately one page.

Week 7 Handout: Governing Magazine, TOPIC FOR DESIGN BRIEF DUE BY WEDNESDAY.
READ: Janoff, chapters 1 & 2.

Week 8 Discussion of readings, TOPIC DUE FOR FINAL MONDAY.
READ: Janoff, chapters 3 & 10.

Week 9: Spring Break, March 10–12.

Week 10 Discussion of Readings, Monday, **Brief due at the beginning of class Wednesday March 19.** Presentations.
READ: Janoff, chapter 4.

COMPONENT 3: THEORY AND CRITICISM

Week 11–16

Exploring graphic design’s place on the cultural and intellectual landscape. What is a graphic designer? A craftsperson? an artist? a communicator? A hired gun? None of these? Over the past 40 years, graphic design has matured tremendously as a profession, evolving from a so-called commercial art to a field with a history and a critical and intellectual foundation. As designers have sensed their growing influence over the culture and visual landscape, they have started to write about it. There is still much to be done. Unlike architecture, which has sprouted a large external critical and historical community, most graphic design theorists and writers have emerged from design itself—internal criticism is inherently limited by politics and a lack of distance. This last section will explore some of the big and small issues central to design: Is there a place for “pure” design criticism (i.e. unconnected to an artifact’s marketplace function)?, what is the role/value of design education? Should designers embrace vernacular design? Should graphic designers claim professional status through certification, and if so, how do you determine a commonly accepted set of intellectual, creative, and craft skills? Most design products emerge from a collaborative process, how do you balance the rights of co-creators over the final piece? Do design artifacts evolve in meaning over time? Students will explore these and other issues through discussion, reading and writing.

Assignment: Students will write no less than 1500 and no more than 2000 words on a self-selected topic that investigates the role of graphic design or the designer in today’s society. This topic can emerge from one of the pieces we have read this semester or it could be based on their own philosophy as a design practitioner. OR Student may choose to undertake an examination of these issues through a serious exploration of the work of a practitioner whom they admire or field of design that interests them. As always, the final must show evidence of research, and must thoughtfully apply that research to the topic.

For the final project, the format of class will change from discussion and critique to more aggressively editorial. As a group we will work on matters of structure, clarity and logic.

Week 11 Ongoing Brief presentations Monday (and Wednesday if needed). Continuing discussion of reading and blog.
READ: *Literacy*, 55-70, or as assigned.

Week 12 Discussion of reading and blog.
FIRST DRAFT OF FINAL DUE WEDNESDAY April 2, critiques.
READ: *Literacy*, 400-405, 389-390 or as assigned.

Week 13 Continuing critiques.
READ: *Literacy*, 90-105 or as assigned.

Week 14 Continuing critiques, discussion of reading and blog.

Week 15 Continuing critiques, discussion of reading and blog.

Week 16 Monday: continuing critiques. Wednesday: NO CLASS, WORK DAY (I’ll be available for last-minute consultations).

Final Due: Monday May 5, NO EXTENSIONS.