George Mason University
Course Syllabus

Course Title: Writing for Artists: Graphic Design Edition
Course Code/Section: AVT 395, Section 4
Session/Year: Fall, 2008
Meeting: Tuesdays, 4:30–7:10 PM, FAB B204
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 of 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. Continuing development of reading and editing skills.

Attendance Policy

Lab courses are, by their nature, dynamic educational environments. 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 two or more absences will receive a reduced or failing grade.

• There are no excused absences.

Exhibit:

Students are required to attend *Ballyhoo! Posters as Portraiture*, at the National Portrait Gallery. The museum is located at Eighth and F Streets, NW, DC, 20001, near the Gallery Place/Chinatown stop on the Red line.

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.

Required and 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 life. 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. **In order to keep the class topical, there will also be reading assignments from the web sites mentioned below.**

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.

Meggs, Philip, *A History of Graphic Design* (3rd or 4th ed.), John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1998.

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) pricey, but are also 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 September 16; the 2000 word "design brief" due October 21, the Final, due December 12, and the twelve 150-word blog entries due throughout the semester. All of the longer pieces will be completed through a draft/feedback/revision process. Drafts will be due to your partner two sessions before the final due date, and second drafts will be due one week before the final. All written work is expected to get substantively and notice-ably better with each draft. All work will be turned in electronically through the class' virtual learning space: writingfordesigners.com. Hard copies of edited versions and partner edits will also be due in class on due dates. In addition to your own writing, you will receive a grade for the quality and attentiveness of the editing job you do for your partner, and the time you invest in reviewing his or her work.

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.
- Thoughtfulness and thoroughness of your edit of your partner's work.

Class and University Policies:

- All projects are due at the **beginning** of class on the date assigned. Late projects (including late drafts) 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: criticism, business theory and business and professional 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 "private" (ie only people in class will see these) pages on the class blog.

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 half of each class to discussing readings and half to 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. In general, your text will be due to your partner on class day and your partner's feedback is due back to you via e-mail or hard copy by the following Friday. 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 communicate with your partner outside of class, so be sure to exchange e-mail and/or phone numbers.

Blog

You are required to make at least 12 contributions to the class blog—www.writingfordesigners.com. according to the schedule you will receive next week. Posts should average at least two paragraphs of not less than five sentences each or 150 words. 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 two 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 (and all good short) 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 all blog topics, but your schedule will include a short list of topics you must "hit" at some time during the semester. In general, 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). However, 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. The final entry will be the basis for blog grading. Students will receive three blog grades at approximately 1/3 course intervals. In sum, your blog work will add up to the equivalent of one of the longer pieces. 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. It should be noted that in the short time the blog ran last spring, it did receive a bit of notice from the broader design community, and several noted designers chose to comment.

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? A good 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 understand 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*?)

08/26:   Introduction to class, discussion of journalistic structure. First assignment discussed. Discussion of basic lede/nut form. Assignment: for next class bring photocopied article of 800–1500 words on graphic design topic from the print version of one of the above-listed design magazines. READ: *Janoff, Chapter 13 and as assigned*.

09/02:   Writing handout, Discussion of articles brought in. Blog schedule handed out, blog software demonstrated READ: *as assigned*.

09/09:   Tuesday, discussion of reading. first draft of critique due to your student partner. ethics assignment discussed, discussion of design proposal project. READ: *as assigned, Closer, 4-13, 26-31*.

09/16:   First draft of critique due in class along with your edit of your partner's work. (be sure to hand in your edit as a hard copy—the text will have changed on the blog). Discussion of Reading. READ: *Closer, 57-65, 101-113*.

COMPONENT 2: DESIGN BUSINESS WRITING

Week 5–9   **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 **goal-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 package, web site, or other small printed piece you have found that needs a redesign. While a proposal can take many forms, there is commonly a letter that thanks the client, and highlights your qualifications and your approach, and the proposal itself, ranging from a few pages to 60 or 70 depending on the scope of the project. A suggest format: 1. Introduction, describe the physical project to be designed, and what the piece is expected to accomplish—drum up new business? provide

information to customers? encourage existing customers to purchase value-added services? In the case of a redesign, you would likely include an analysis/critique of the existing piece—explain what's good or bad about it, where it falls short in accomplishing goals, and what could be done to improve it. (300 words). Finally, the heart of your piece will explain how your approach will be better—which may include reduced cost or greater flexibility, or a general discussion of the sort of imagery or typography that might be more effective. 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.

09/23:   **Final version of critique due in class.** Discussion of reading, design proposals examined, Topic for proposal due. Handout: Governing Magazine. READ: Janoff, chapters 3 & 10 and as assigned. Wanted: volunteers to have their résumé edited in class.

09/30:   Résumé review, discussion of reading. Blog review. READ: Janoff, chapter 4 and as assigned.

10/07:   First draft of proposal with letter due to partner. Discussion of reading. In-class assignment.
READ: Janoff, chapters 1 & 2 and as assigned.

10/14:   No class, however you may send your second draft to me for comment by Tuesday of this week.

10/21:   Final version of brief with quote due. review of briefs. Discussion of Readings, Tuesday. One paragraph proposal for final project due. Presentations. READ: *Closer, 181-192, 190-199 and as assigned*.

COMPONENT 3: THEORY AND ETHICS

Week 10–16   **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 Option 1: Students will write no less that 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 a historical look at a design practitioner or movement in design history that interests them. As always, the final must show evidence of research, and must thoughtfully apply that research to the topic.

Assignment Option 2: We have spent a lot of discussion time on the ethical implications of practicing graphic design at the beginning of the 21st century. Students may choose to write no less than 1500 and no more than 2000 words on one of the following topics that further explores the issues we have discussed. 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 film-making 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?

10/28:   Ongoing Brief presentations (if needed). Continuing discussion of reading and
            blog. READ: as assigned.

11/04:   Discussion of reading and blog. First draft of final due to partner.
            READ: *Literacy, 400-405, 389-390 or* as assigned.

11/11:   Continuing critiques. Second draft of final due in class, editing.
            READ: *Literacy, 90-105 or* as assigned.

11/18:   Continuing editing, discussion of reading and blog.

11/25:   (Day before Thanksgiving break) Continuing editing, discussion of reading and
            blog.

12/02:   **Final due with all edits in place.** NO EXTENSIONS. Have a good holiday.