

## George Mason University Course Syllabus

<b>Course Title:</b>	Writing for Artists: Graphic Design Edition
<b>Course Code/Section:</b>	AVT 395, Section 4
<b>Session/Year:</b>	Spring, 2009
<b>Meeting:</b>	Thursdays, 4:30–7:10 pm, Thompson 121
<b>Professor:</b>	Jandos Rothstein
<b>Contact Info:</b>	jrothste@gmu.edu
<b>Class information:</b>	www.jandos.com/for students
<b>Office Hours:</b>	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 to him or herself and 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. In short, your attendance is just as important as mine. 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 Steven Heller’s lecture, “Iron Graphics: Designing For Totalitarian States” Harris Theater, 7:30 pm. April 9, 2009. **Note:** Students are also required to ask Professor Heller a question (during the Q&A period, or before or after the talk), and writing about the question and his answer will be one of your required blog posts

## 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.

### 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.*

**Poyner, 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

*Emigré*, 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](http://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 26; the 2000 word "design brief" due April 2, the Final, due April 30, and the twelve 150-word blog entries due regularly 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 noticeably better with each draft. All work will be turned in electronically through the class' virtual learning space: writing-fordesigners.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. (40%)
- Technical quality of writing, evidence of research, and careful and thoughtful writing and editing. (40%)
- Spelling, grammar, general care in manuscript preparation and presentation. (20%)

### **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. Students are responsible for the content of messages that bounce due to

“over limit” errors.

- 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.

### **Useful Information:**

**Open Studio Hours** AVT teaching studios are open to students for extended periods of time mornings, evenings and weekends whenever classes are not in progress. Policies, procedures and schedules for studio use are established by the AVT studio faculty and are posted in the studios.

**ArtsBus** The dates for this spring’s ArtsBus trips are FEBRUARY 28, MARCH 28, and APRIL 18. If you need ArtsBus credit for this semester, you **MUST** enroll in AVT 300. This also applies to anyone who intends to travel to New York independently, or do the DC Alternate Assignment. There will be **NO** exceptions. If you plan to go on multiple ArtsBus trips this term and wish to count them towards your total requirement, you must enroll in multiple sections of AVT 300. Please go to the ArtsBus website: <http://artsbus.gmu.edu> “Student Information” for additional, very important information regarding ArtsBus policy.

### **Important Deadlines**

Last Day to Add (Full-Semester Course) **February 3**

Last Day to Drop (Full-Semester Course) **February 20**

Elective Withdrawal Period (Full-Semester) **February 23-March 27**

Incomplete work from Fall due to instructor **March 20**

Once the add and drop deadlines have passed, instructors do not have the authority to approve requests from students to add or drop/withdraw late. Requests for late adds (up until the last day of classes) must be made by the student in the AVT office (or the office of the department offering the course), and generally are only approved in the case of a documented university error (such as a problem with financial aid processing). Requests for non-elective withdrawals and retroactive adds (adds after the last day of classes) must be approved by the academic dean of the college in which the student’s major is located. For AVT majors, that is the CVPA Office of Academic Affairs, Performing Arts Building A407.

### **Course Outline** (Subject to change)

Our time this semester will be broken into three major components: criticism, business, and theory/research with one written project and blog entries associated with each. All written projects must be turned in as both hard copies (12 point text, double-spaced lines with 1” margins) and through the class blog. 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 half of each class to discussing assigned 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 one weekly contributions to the class blog—[www.writingfordesigners.com](http://www.writingfordesigners.com). Posts must average 150 words each to be counted, though students are also free to use the blog to share design-related links or images. 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 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 specifics or every topic, but will give you a schedule that includes a few required themes you should touch on. I reserve the right to impose more specific subject requirements if it seems necessary. 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).

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 is 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 our experience—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 perceptions 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 green city with black buildings, 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 (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, 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*?)

## COMPONENT 1: INTRODUCTION

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| 01/22 | 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. |
| 01/29 | Writing handout, Discussion of articles brought in. Blog schedule handed out, blog software demonstrated READ: as assigned.  |
| 02/05 | Discussion of reading. first draft of critique due to your student partner. Discussion of design proposal project. READ: as assigned, Closer, 4-13, 26-31.   |

02/19 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, type-faces and paper at all (these topics are too esoteric for most clients to bother with). Many proposals also have a cost estimate based on parameters outlined in the proposal or project requirements and a payment schedule. There is also usually a cover letter thanking the client, summarizing major points of the proposal, and noting specific qualifications of designer for the work in question. Many proposals include a visual component.

**Assignment:** You have met with a potential client, and shown him or her your work. They have told you a bit about an upcoming design project, and have asked you to prepare a proposal for a brochure, package, web site, or another small printed piece. (you should find a real piece upon which to base your discussion) that needs to be freshened up, updated, or reconsidered. You are competing with one or more other designers for the work, so the proposal really will serve two purposes: a road map towards a solution *and* a sales pitch. While a proposal can take many forms, yours will follow a standard simple format which will include these components: 1. A letter that thanks the client, and briefly highlights your qualifications and your approach, and the proposal itself. Yours will include these sections: 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? Your potential client may be working on several things at once—be sure he or she know which one you are talking about. As there is a pre-existing piece, you would likely include a few thoughts about what's good or bad about it, where it falls short in accomplishing goals, and what could be done to improve it. (Be delicate! Your client may be proud of it). Finally, the heart of your proposal will explain how your approach will serve the client—which may include reduced production costs, greater flexibility, longer usable life, or a general discussion of the sort of imagery or typography that might be effective. Your package should also include a price estimate that includes both your time, costs, and printing costs (if applicable). (You should get a real quote from a local commercial printer to base this on—not an internet or quick printing service such as Kinkos, Staples or a campus service). The printer quote must be turned in with your final. Your turned in final should look as if it is intended for a client—letter on a separate page with address info and date, proposal with cover and section headers. Make it look pretty and businesslike.

02/26 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.
03/05	Résumé review, discussion of reading. Blog review. READ: Janoff, chapter 4 and as assigned.
03/10	SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS (However, you may, if you wish, send a draft of your proposal to me for review.)
03/19	First draft of proposal with letter due to partner. Discussion of reading. In-class assignment. READ: Janoff, chapters 1 & 2 and as assigned.
04/02	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 than 1500 and no more than 2000 words on a self-selected topic (subject to approval) 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 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?

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?

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 newsmagazine. 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?

- 04/09 Ongoing Brief presentations (if needed). Continuing discussion of reading and blog. READ: as assigned. (Steven Heller's lecture begins after class)
- 04/16 Discussion of reading and blog. First draft of final due to partner. READ: Literacy, 400-405, 389-390 or as assigned.
- 04/23 Continuing critiques. Second draft of final due in class, editing. READ: Literacy, 90-105 or as assigned.
- 04/18 Continuing editing, discussion of reading and blog.**
- 11/25 Continuing editing, discussion of reading and blog.**
- 04/30 Final due with all edits in place. NO EXTENSIONS. Have a great summer.