

# English 357: Visual Culture and Language

**Fall 2012**  
**3 Credits**  
**Time: 9:00-9:50**  
**MWF SE 314.**

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Office Hours: open door



Scott McCloud's "Big Triangle" from <http://www.scottmcccloud.com>

[HTTP://vcl357.wordpress.com](http://vcl357.wordpress.com)

## Course Description and Objectives

This course will cover the rise of visual culture and the impact this historical shift has made on print culture and writing. Students will produce information graphics, photo essays, remix or mash-up videos and analytical essays. Prereq: English 120. Junior standing.

The course is intended to help students learn the vocabulary of visual language, and in turn help them learn how to read and produce visual communications. The course will be writing/design intensive: students will do very little traditional kinds of writing assignments, but will regularly be asked to communicate in a visually and verbally effective way.

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Explain visual culture and language to friends and family (because visual culture is a great topic for conversation), as well as explain it to the instructor.
- Analyze print and screen forms of communication with precision, drawing on the vocabulary and frameworks introduced in the course.
- Produce effective visual communication in print and on the screen related to personal, professional, and/or educational goals.

## English Department Outcomes

While this course is designed to appeal to, and be appropriate for, students from all majors at NDSU, English majors taking this course will produce work that can meet three departmental outcomes. English majors in this class should save all work for possible inclusion in their capstone portfolio.

- Outcome 1: English majors will be able to write and speak effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences in a variety of genres and media.
- Outcome 2: English majors will be able to read (analyze, interpret, critique, evaluate) written and visual texts.
- Outcome 6: English majors will be familiar with visual language and communication as culturally and historically embedded practices.

This course can also count towards a English Minor in Writing. For all English degrees, visit [http://www.ndsu.edu/english/majors\\_and\\_minors/advising\\_information\\_and\\_forms/](http://www.ndsu.edu/english/majors_and_minors/advising_information_and_forms/)

## General Education Outcomes

This course has been approved for General Education credit in the Communication Category. This course can meet NDSU students' requirement to take an upper-division writing-intensive class, although many majors will require a specific course be taken in order to meet their own graduation needs.

### **GE Outcome 1: Communicate effectively in a variety of contexts and modes, using a variety of communication skills.**

- Communicate effectively in assigned written, visual, and hybrid genres (written-visual).
- Develop a meta-language for being able to talk about and analyze visual language.

### **GE Outcome 6: Integrate knowledge and ideas in a coherent and meaningful manner.**

- Provide written analysis of visual language artifacts.
- Demonstrate understanding of the history of visual culture and language.

## Course Policies

*Academic Dishonesty/Plagiarism:* Work submitted for this course must adhere to the Code of Academic Responsibility and Conduct as cited in the *Handbook of Student Policies*: "The academic community is operated on the basis of honesty, integrity, and fair play. Occasionally, this trust is violated when cheating occurs, either inadvertently or deliberately. This code will serve as the guideline for cases where cheating, plagiarism, or other academic improprieties have occurred. . . . Faculty members may fail the student for the particular assignment, test, or course involved, or they may recommend that the student drop the course in question, or these penalties may be varied with the gravity of the offense and the circumstances of the particular case" (65). See the NDSU policy manual for full details: <http://www.ndsu.nodak.edu/policy/335.htm>

*Academic Honesty Defined:* All written and oral presentations must "respect the intellectual rights of others. Statements lifted verbatim from publications must be cited as quotations. Ideas, summaries or paraphrased material, and other information taken from the literature must be properly referenced" (*Guidelines for the Presentation of Disquisitions*, NDSU Graduate School, 4).

**Special Needs:** In keeping with the Americans with Disabilities Act, I would encourage students with disabilities who need accommodations in this course to contact me as soon as possible so that the appropriate arrangements can be made to accommodate particular needs.

### Attendance

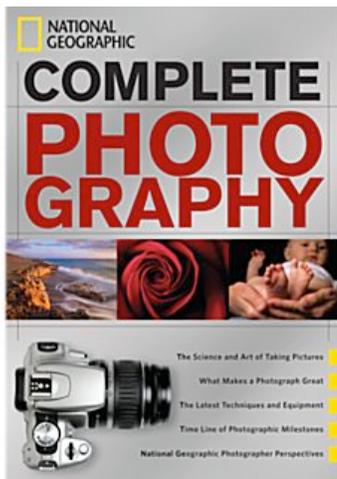
In compliance with NDSU University Policy, Section 333: Class Attendance and Policy and Procedure, the English Department has established the following attendance policy. All English Department courses require active learning. Students are expected to speak, listen, and contribute. Therefore, prompt, regular attendance is required. Students who miss more than four weeks of class during the standard academic semester (e.g. twelve 50 minute classes, eight 75 minute classes, or their equivalent) will not pass the course. Moreover, each student is accountable for all work missed because of absence, and instructors have no obligation to make special arrangements for missed work. Additional attendance requirements may be implemented at the discretion of the individual instructor. See "Class participation" for more details.

## Expectations

- An appropriately demanding college course should require you to work approximately 9 hours per week. This course will require sustained engagement; neglecting it for a few weeks at a time will result in you falling behind.

- Show respect for your classmates, their ideas, and their work. This class will require you to share your ideas with classmates, either in class, through electronic discussion, or through peer review. Learning to respect—even understand—diverse perspectives is one of the hallmarks of a university-educated person.
- Be observant, thoughtful, and curious. I will do very little lecturing in this course; I will be trying to help you developed more sophisticated ways of looking at texts and images, help you think more deeply and richly about issues that matter to you, and help you develop a sense of intellectual curiosity.
- Have fun! I learn best when I am having fun, and I assume others do too! The assignments in this class will give you a chance to be creative and experimental, but should also help you with professional skills and goals.

## Required Texts



McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage*. 1967. Ginko P, 2001.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. 1993. NY: HarperCollins, 1994.

National Geographic. *Complete Photography*. Washington DC: National Geographic, 2011.

Additional readings will be linked to from the course website or made available through Blackboard.

[HTTP://vcl357.wordpress.com](http://vcl357.wordpress.com)

## Assignments

Longer assignment descriptions will be made available on the website or via handouts, but this synopsis will give you snapshots of the work you will do in the course.

### **Timeline / information graphic assignment: 200 points.**

You will practice some of the principles of visual communication by researching and designing a timeline for a technology, process, or product relevant to the rise of visual culture. You will work with a partner or in a group of three; the rhetorical emphasis will be on clearly and powerfully presenting information. The medium can be paper (poster-size) or it can be on the screen via one of the many pieces of software for making timelines, or you could use a presentation software like Prezi. The word-picture balance might favor words a little bit.

### **Photo essay: 200 points.**

Photo essays can be on a variety of subjects, but these kinds of essays are often best at capturing identities—what people look like, and how they view themselves. For this assignment, you will be required to take your own photographs, but you can also use images from other sources. You can select, touch up, draw on, write on, and assemble those images (within PowerPoint, for the web, or another program of your choice) to form a photo essay. The rhetorical emphasis will be on making an argument, offering a proposal, or communicating an insight through images and words. The word-picture balance will tilt in the direction of image-dominance.

The goal of this assignment is to give you practice working with images other than clip art and drawing tools (the focus of the Timeline assignment), and to give you practice with presentation software like PowerPoint or web presentation software. Over 2 million people regularly make presentations in the United States each year, so to communicate in a visual culture will require facility with presentation software.

### **Video remix or mash-up assignment: 200 points.**

Even though English departments value words, we have to admit that the dominant communicative power in a visual culture is not only the image, but the moving image: television, film, and video games dominate the collective cultural attention span in North America. Visual culture is also a remix culture. With still and moving images, as well as music, readily available in digital format, the ability to remix or mash-up multiple media forms has ended up on our laps.

For this assignment, I will encourage you to be a little bit abstract, to create an experimental video that communicates with images and a soundtrack, but not spoken words. The goal of this assignment is to give you a chance to work with the associative logic of images, and try out video editing software. The rhetorical emphasis on this assignment is to entertain or intrigue your viewers. The word-picture balance will definitely favor the picture.

### **Three analyses of models: 50 points each = 150 points total.**

For each assignment, I will ask you to analyze a model appropriate to the project. Your analyses should not only give you insight into how visual language works, but it will also be a way to continue working on some of the principles of designing information graphics. This course is a writing course, and these three short assignments will be where you do most of your traditional writing.

### **A test that shows me what you know. 50 points**

One of the goals of this class is to help you develop an understanding of visual culture, so a test that asks you things like when photography was invented and why our culture seems to *desire* images seems appropriate. A second goal of the class is to help you develop a vocabulary for talking about visual language, so I might ask you to list and explain 3 of the 7 word-image combinations Scott McCloud covers in *Understanding Comics*.

### **A digital portfolio, including final presentation of portfolio. 100 points**

You will build your digital portfolio throughout the course, but during the last two weeks you can revise your work, redesign your portfolio, contextualize your work, add in other selections from other courses, and generally prepare a portfolio that you could show to a prospective employer, a graduate school, or anyone else you want to impress. For the final exam, I will ask you to make a clear, effective oral / visual presentation of your portfolio to the rest of the class and possibly some external evaluators.

### **Class participation: 100 pts.**

You will write a one-to-two page memo at the end of the semester, scoring yourself on the following components of class participation. This memo will be an opportunity to make an argument that will really make a difference in your life!

- Attendance = expected. Perfect attendance = 10 point bonus! Two absences = no penalty.  
 Subtract 5 points from class participation for each absences 3-9. A tenth absence will result in a loss of all in-class participation points; an eleventh absence will result in loss of all work ethic points, and a twelfth absence will result in an “F” for the course because you will have been absent for 1/4 of the semester. If extenuating circumstances (health problems, family priorities, etc.) kept you away from classes, you can explain those situations here, but they will only be convincing if you have been talking with me throughout the semester about why you are missing class.
- Class presentations: = 50. Two or three times (maybe more) during the semester I will ask you to make a semiformal presentation in class. I will expect you to be well-prepared, to deliver information effectively using both visual and verbal communication.
- Class participation = 25 (contributions to class discussion, to small group discussions, to peer reviews, etc.) If you are uncomfortable speaking out in full-class discussion, make sure you contribute to small-group discussion, give good peer feedback, etc. Make an argument for an appropriate score out of 20.
- Work ethic = 25. Students can work hard in this course in ways other than the three just listed. If you work harder in this class than other classes, you can claim an excellent work ethic. If you exceed my expectations, you can argue for an excellent work ethic. I am going to recommend that you attend some public events—faithfully attending shows a good work ethic. Make an argument for an appropriate score out of 25.

Be sure that the memo follows generic conventions and be sure to make good typography and design choices—I will reserve the right to lower or raise your Class Participation grade based on the quality of the memo. Total score for course: 1000 points.

### **Grading Scale.**

For the course

- A= 901 — 1000
- B= 801 — 900
- C= 701 — 800
- D = 601 — 700
- F = 600 or below

For individual assignments, break the total score into tenths in order to figure out your grade. E.g. A = 46-50, B = 41-45, C = 36-40, D = 31-35, etc.

### **Definitions of letter grades.**

I will provide a grading rubric for each assignment, but all of the assignments will use the same grade definitions.

- A = excellent document/project in all aspects—some slight room for improvement.
- B = good to very good; some aspects of the document or project might be excellent, others will be good.
- C = acceptable completion of the assignment. No major problems, but room for improvement in most areas of the assignment.
- D = a major aspect of the assignment has not been completed. Elements of the assignment might be quite good, but with unsatisfactory completion of certain elements, the assignment will remain a D.
- F = incomplete assignment because page length was not met, proper research was not completed, proper documentation conventions not followed, genre conventions not adhered to, etc.

# English 357: Visual Culture and Language

Tentative Schedule Fall 2012



## Wednesday August 22<sup>nd</sup>.

What do you know? A first-day, low-stakes test.

## Friday August 24<sup>th</sup>.

Read Chapter 1: Understanding Comics. “Setting the Record Straight.”

Read PDF: horntimeline.pdf (found in course Blackboard shell).

The goal today will be to learn some of the history of visual communication, comics, and visual culture, but also to start studying the genre of “timeline” and informational graphic.

## Monday August 27<sup>th</sup>

Read Chapter 2: Understanding Comics. “The Vocabulary of Comics.”

Most important chapter of the year! The big triangle is explained; central concepts of visual language explained. Let’s test this heuristic out.

## Wednesday August 29<sup>th</sup>.

Read Chapter 3: Understanding Comics. “Blood in the Gutter.”

Learn the six principles of closure, inside and out. Test them.

## Friday August 31:

Find, start to analyze, and bring a timeline or information graphic with “time” as a component to analyze. Share your initial analysis notes and observations in class, get feedback on your analysis. Bringing your timeline and notes to class next week.

## Monday September 3<sup>rd</sup>

Labor Day. No class. Pay close attention to the words and images of labor day.

## Wednesday September 5<sup>th</sup>.

Read Chapters 4 and 5: Understanding Comics. “Time Frames” and “Living in Line.”

We will bring these chapters together by looking carefully at how time is represented in various timelines. Add these concepts to your timeline analysis notes.

Also bring *Complete Photography* so we can look at its timeline.

## Friday September 7<sup>th</sup>

Read Chapter 6: UC. “Show and Tell.”

Word-Picture combinations on the big triangle: bringing the McCloud vocabulary together. Add these concepts to your timelines analysis notes.

**Monday September 10<sup>th</sup>**

Bring finished copy of analysis essay to class for peer review.

**\*\*\*Final copy for grading due on Wednesday.**

**Wednesday September 12<sup>th</sup>**

Read Chapter 7: UC. "The Six Steps."

Brainstorm and timeline topics and form working groups. Plan and/or check your work using McCloud's "six steps" as a guide.

**Friday September 14<sup>th</sup>**

Work day: I will be out of town. Very important not to waste this time. Do necessary research and planning; write a proposal you can submit by Monday.

**Monday September 17<sup>th</sup>.**

Read Juan Durstetler's one page guide to making information graphics.

<http://www.infovis.net/printMag.php?num=73&lang=2>

Proposal for TL / Info graphic with short bibliography.

**Wednesday September 19<sup>th</sup>**

How to write for timelines / information graphics. Groups will be assigned to review the writing that goes into information graphics and timelines. Some designers believe that the images should convey the whole message; others recognize the value of text. I haven't found any resources that do a particularly good job of offering guidelines for writing, so we will investigate, and try to determine them.

**Friday September 21<sup>st</sup>**

Review the material available on Thinking with Type:

<http://papyrus.com/thinkingwithtype/index.htm>

Apply principles to your work in progress. Use classtime as studio time.

**Monday September 24<sup>th</sup>**

Peer review / presentations of timelines / infographics.

Show off your work, take feedback from class, and make final revisions based on feedback.

**Wednesday September 26<sup>th</sup>**

Final copy of timeline posted online. Share URL with me.

Being Unit 2: Photoessay.

Remaining schedule to be developed and shared.

Unit 2: Photoessay. Week 6-10.

Unit 3: Remix / Mashup Video. Week 11-14

Revise and collect into portfolio: Weeks 15-16.

Final Exam: Thursday Dec. 13, 3:15 PM. SE 314.