

The Well-Trained Mind Academy
The Graphic Novel: Between the Panels

Course Blackboard site: www.wtma.blackboard.com

Course Texts

- Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do*. Abrams, 2017. ISBN 9781419718786
- GG. *I'm Not Here*. Koyama Press, 2017. ISBN 9781927668498
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. William Morrow/HarperCollins, 1994. ISBN 9780060976255
- McGuire, Richard. *Here*. Pantheon, 2014. ISBN 978-0375406508
- Sacco, Joe. *The Great War: July 1, 1916. The First Day of the Battle of the Somme*. Norton, 2013. ISBN 9780393088809
- Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon, 2007. ISBN 9780375714832
- Small, David. *Stitches*. Norton, 2010. ISBN 9780393338966
- Swain, Carol. *Gast*. Fantagraphics, 2014. ISBN 9781606997550
- Vehlmann, Fabien and Kerascoet. *Beautiful Darkness*. Drawn + Quarterly, 2014. ISBN 978-1770461291

Course Description

This class aims to instill an understanding of graphic literature and how to read it. From the most basic elements of page and panel construction, to the psychological foundations of pictorial representation and image architecture, the student will emerge from the course equipped to analyze and assess all manner of graphic literature.

Given its inherent ability to blur the boundaries separating text from image, silence from speech, sequential art—comics and graphic novels—is uniquely poised to pursue subjects that are equally resistant to categorization. In fact, it is this ability to distort and reconfigure expectations that makes thinking of the comic as simply a hybrid work of prose and graphics a wild underestimation. Because, when all is said and done, what happens *between* the panels, in the formal emptiness where both image and text end, is what allows the graphic novel to reveal so much about how and why we do what we do.

In addition to expanding critical reading and thinking skills, enriching analytical and interpretative strategies, and instilling an understanding of the historical trajectory of sequential art, this class will rely on eight graphic novels to illustrate the field's unique ability to illuminate complex subjects. These eight works will pursue four primary themes: *home*, *loss*, *identity*, and *war*.

Please note: This course is designed for high-school students. Several of these readings contain images, scenarios, subjects, and themes that younger and/or more sensitive readers may find upsetting or unsettling. While these texts are appropriate for mature high school students, students and parents should be aware of the complexities and intensities of these readings in advance. If you have any concerns we encourage you to check the texts out at the local library before enrolling your student.

Written Assignments

Students will be expected to write **critical responses** on a weekly basis. These responses will vary in parameter and scope, but will require students to analyze, critique, and engage the required reading(s) of the week. Critical responses will give the student opportunities to synthesize course concepts, challenge classroom dialogue, and unearth questions for which the writer may or may not have answers. For example, a critical response could: identify a strategy deployed by the author, theorize why the author uses it, and pose a question of the class. Think of the critical response as an opportunity to process your thoughts on the reading and inspire responses from classmates.

Additionally, students will write no fewer than two (2) analytical essays (1,000 word min.) in which they posit original arguments/theses about a concept, text, or series of texts covered in or inspired by class discussion.

A final project will combine critical analysis and the opportunity for creative invention. Students could write a longer argumentative essay about one or more of the course texts. Students could create a graphic response in the style of *Understanding Comics* in which they make an argument about one or all of the case studies from the semester. Since this is the culminating work of the semester, students should feel at liberty to develop project ideas as they see fit, as long as they are capable of articulating how and why the project is relevant to the course.

Class Participation

The vast majority of the student's evaluation will be derived from their willingness to engage in classroom discussion and to synthesize the concepts introduced into their analyses. The ability to eloquently and thoughtfully articulate one's perspective is at the heart of all writing and reading, and will be the locus of success in the course.

Classroom participation is defined as completing weekly assignments, actively posing and answering questions in discussion, and contributing to the analysis and evaluation of peer work.

Grading Breakdown

Given the nature of the material and its relationship to articulating ideas in a clear, concise, and thoughtful manner, a large portion of the student's grade will be determined by participation (discussion, responses, etc.). The percentage breakdown is as follows:

Participation: 25%

Critical responses: 25%

Analytical essays: 25%

Final project: 25%

Example Schedule

Each week below will have an accompanying assignment. These assignments will be due before the *next* class session.

Weeks 1 & 2. An introduction to Sequential Art.

Assignment: Read the first five (5) chapters of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*.

Choose a concept therein—or a question inspired by a concept therein—and compose a critical response to the text.

Week 3. A Picture Idiom.

Assignment: Finish *Understanding Comics*. Compose a critical response. Create a wordless four-panel comic. The title of your comic must be a *concept* (e.g., “Survival,” “Resemblance,” “False.”)

Week 4 & 5. Identity: The Ways that Made Us.

Assignment: Read *The Complete Persepolis*. Compose a critical response to the reading.

Week 6. Identity, continued.

Assignment: Read *Stitches*. Compose a critical response to the reading.

Week 7. Finish the Self and Respond to the Selves.

Assignment: Compose a critical response in which you compare and contrast the two texts from the identity case study.

Week 8. War.

Assignment: Read *The Great War*. Compose a critical response to the reading.

Additionally, choose an event that you feel is ideally suited for Sacco’s choice of form. Be prepared to explain how and why the chosen event and the form align.

Week 9. War, continued.

Assignment: Read *The Best We Could Do*. Compose a critical response to the reading. Come prepared with no fewer than three potential essay subjects for our case study on **either** war **or** identity.

Week 10. A Kind of Armistice.

Assignment: Compose an analysis of the two texts that constituted our case study on **either** war **or** identity. This should be a thesis-driven essay that uses the texts and outside sources as evidence. Title, works cited, footnotes/endnotes required. (Minimum: 1000 words.)

Week 11. There Was a Time I Knew a Thing; Or, What it Means to Lose.

Assignment: Read *Gast*. Compose a critical response to the reading.

Week 12. To Lose, continued.

Assignment: Read *I’m Not Here*. Compose a critical response to the reading.

Week 13. But Now Found.

Assignment: Compose a critical response in which you compare and contrast the two texts from the loss case study.

Week 14. Where a Heart Is.

Assignment: Read *Beautiful Darkness*. Compose a critical response to the reading.

Week 15. Home is, cont.

Assignment: Read *Here*. Compose a critical response to the reading. Come prepared with no fewer than three (3) potential essay subjects for our case study on **either** home **or** loss.

Week 16. Divided Cannot Stand.

Assignment: Compose an analysis of the two texts that constituted our case study on **either** home **or** loss. This should be a thesis-driven essay that uses the texts and outside sources as evidence. Title, works cited, footnotes/endnotes required. (Minimum: 1000 words.)

Week 17. What Now?

Assignment: Develop a proposal for your final project. Your proposal should be specific, explained, and articulate. You should be able to present the idea to the class, answer any questions we might have, and explain why this project represents a culmination of the course for you.

Week 18. What Have We Learned?

Assignment: Finish your final project.