



CIED 5683/ENGL 3903: Graphic Novels for Adolescents

Old Main 420

Monday 6:00 PM – 8:45 PM

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Course Description:

In the past decade scholars and teachers have expressed an interest in graphic novels as both cultural artifacts and as resources for use in literacy education. Like their older sibling, the comic book, graphic novels combine two sign systems—word and image—to construct a narrative. As such, the ability to read and interpret them might be said to involve multiple literacies—one verbal, the other visual. How do readers experience and interpret graphic novels? What design patterns do authors and readers draw on to make meaning when they produce (write) and consume (read) works written in the medium of comics? What does engaging in “close readings” of graphic novels entail? What do literacy teachers need to know to engage students in critical conversations about graphic novels? These are some of the questions we’ll explore as we examine the affordances and constraints of a form of storytelling that has historically been popular with adolescents, and which is capturing the attention of some classroom teachers.

Course Objectives:

- Students will describe the historical shifts that have occurred in debates about comic books and graphic novels as a form of reading material.
- Students will explain how the multimodal design of comics shapes the meanings that readers recognize as available to them.
- Students will apply their knowledge of visual/verbal storytelling conventions to create an original graphic narrative.
- Students will develop greater autonomy as readers by generating and answering their own questions about the graphic novels and theoretical essays they read.
- Students will read, write, and talk critically about a diverse range of graphic novels.
- Students will publish their work online for an authentic audience when appropriate.

Essential Questions:

Throughout the semester, we’ll work together to answer the following questions:

- What shifts have occurred in critical debates about comic books and graphic novels as a form of reading material, and what has motivated those shifts?
- By definition, what are comics, and what (if anything) is distinct about the form?
- What is the “language” of comics, and how does it influence the meanings that readers construct as they transact with graphic novels?
- How can the concept of “design” serve as a framework for understanding how readers make meaning in their transactions with graphic novels?
- How do readers construct meaning as they transact with multimodal texts? What metaphor best captures the processes readers engage in to construct meaning in their transactions with graphic novels?
- What does reading comics closely entail, and what are the implications for comics criticism?
- In the case of graphic storytelling, what constitutes “excellence,” and how can it be measured?

Required Texts: (available at *Campus Bookstore* / 616 N. Garland Avenue)

- Backderf, Derf. (2012). *My Friend Dahmer*. New York: Abrams ComicArts.
- Gaiman, Neil, and P. Craig Russell. (2009). *Coraline*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Johnson, R. Kikuo. (2006). *Night Fisher*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.
- Kelly, Joe and J. Ken Niimura. (2010). *I Kill Giants*. Berkeley: Image Comics.
- Lemire, Jeff. (2009). *The Complete Essex County*. Atlanta: Top Shelf Productions.
- Lemire, Jeff. (2014). *Trillium*. New York: Vertigo.
- McCloud, Scott. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Millar, Mark, Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunket. (2004). *Superman: Red Son*. New York: DC Comics.
- Moon, Fabio, and Gabriel Ba. (2011). *Daytripper*. New York: Vertigo.
- Satrapi, Marjane. (2007). *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon.
- Small, David. (2009). *Stitches: A Memoir*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Spiegelman, Art. (2003). *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon.

Note: *The secondary course readings will be available to students on Blackboard.*

Course Policies:

Warning/Disclaimer: The cartoonists whose work we will study use the medium of comics to address a range of sensitive issues and they sometimes do so in open and graphic ways. This course is not for the feint-hearted or closed-minded. If you think you might be offended by graphic representations and/or discussions of religion, child abuse, sex, violence, death, or other sensitive issues not mentioned here, then this course is not for you. If you have concerns about these issues, please do not hesitate to talk with me.

Late Assignments: Late work will be assessed a penalty of 15% (the equivalent of one letter grade) to be deducted from the grade a student would otherwise have earned for an assignment. Written work submitted two days after the assigned due date will be evaluated upon request, but credit will not be granted.

Submission of Assignments: Unless otherwise specified, written work turned in for evaluation should be typewritten and double-spaced and should employ 1 inch margins on all sides. Please use 12-point font and a legible typeface. Be sure your printer toner allows you to produce clear copies prior to the date of submission. Written work submitted by email will not be accepted.

Academic Honesty: As a core part of its mission, the University of Arkansas provides students with the opportunity to further their educational goals through programs of study and research in an environment that promotes freedom of inquiry and academic responsibility. Accomplishing this mission is only possible when intellectual honesty and individual integrity prevail. Each University of Arkansas student is required to be familiar with and abide by the University's "Academic Integrity Policy," which may be found at <http://provost.uark.edu/> Students with questions about how these policies apply to a particular course or assignment should immediately contact their instructor.

Accommodations: Students with disabilities requesting reasonable accommodations must first register with the Center for Students with Disabilities. The CSD is located in the Arkansas Union, room 104 and on the web at: <http://www.uark.edu/ua/csd/applications.htm> The CSD provides documentation to students with disabilities who must then provide this documentation to their course instructors. Students with disabilities should notify their course instructors of their need for reasonable accommodations in a timely manner to ensure that sufficient time to arrange reasonable accommodation implementation and effectiveness. A typical time frame for arranging reasonable accommodations for students who are registered with the CSD is approximately one to two weeks.

Classroom Behavior: Appropriate classroom behavior is expected of the instructor and all students. Inappropriate and disruptive classroom behavior (inappropriate language and gestures, class disruptions, disrespect to other students or instructor, and other behavior determined by the instructor) will not be tolerated and will result in possible removal from the class and/or disciplinary action as per the student handbook.

Inclement Weather: In case of inclement weather, class will be held unless cancelled by the University of Arkansas. If classes have not been cancelled and the student feels it is too dangerous to come to class because of the weather, it is the responsibility of the student to make up missed assignments and be prepared for the next class meeting.

Mobile Devices: I appreciate the importance of having a mobile device available in case of emergencies. Please follow my lead, however, by muting your mobile device and monitoring it as infrequently as possible during class.

Incompletes: Incompletes are not given except in the case of a documented medical emergency. If you choose to take an incomplete for any other reason, the default grade will be an "E."

Course Requirements:

Attendance: Given the importance of our work, and recognizing that this class meets once a week, your attendance in class is required. If you miss three classes your grade will be lowered by one letter (e.g., "B" to "C"). A fourth absence will lower your grade two letters, meaning that you can earn no higher than a "C". A fifth absence will result in your failing the course. Please note that I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, except in the case of a documented medical emergency. If you are unable to attend class for any reason, it is your responsibility to e-mail me *in advance* and explain the situation. Note: *If a student is tardy three times, it will be counted as an absence.*

Reading Check Quizzes: (60 points) This is a reading intensive course. Recognizing that, I'll administer three unannounced reading check quizzes during the semester. The quizzes are not meant to penalize you. Rather, they are intended to ensure that you've completed the assigned readings and that you are prepared to participate productively in class discussions. Missing quizzes (or performing poorly on them) will have an adverse effect on your grade. As such, it is important that you take time to prepare for each class meeting. Please note that quizzes missed due to absences cannot be made up. The quizzes will cover both the graphic novels and the secondary articles we read.

Discussion Leader: (80 points) In keeping with the spirit of constructivist teaching, my objective is for us to work together as a community of learners to deepen our appreciation for the graphic novels we read for class each week. With that in mind, you'll be expected to work with a partner to lead one class discussion about an assigned graphic novel. Prior to our meeting for class, you'll need to research the author and graphic novel your discussion focuses on with the goal of learning more about them. You should consult a range of interviews (print, video; and audio) they have given about their work; articles and reviews other people have written about the graphic novel; and articles and videos about content/issues associated with the graphic novel; etc. You'll be expected to share resources with your classmates that are relevant to your discussion by embedding them on a digitally annotated image you create for publication on our class web site. Prior to facilitating your discussion, you and your partner will also need to prepare a handout that highlights two or three "big" questions you'd like the class to explore. The handout should include key panels/excerpts from the graphic novel that strike you as relevant to the questions you're exploring. Finally, you and your partner will need to co-author a short blog post (approximately 600-700 words) in which you frame the questions/issues you plan to explore and work through your initial ideas about them. Questions to ask as you compose your blog post include: What "big" questions/issues does the graphic novel raise for you, and why do you consider them noteworthy? What problems or issues underlie those questions/issues? I will publish your blog post and annotated image on the class website in advance of our meeting. With that in mind, you're expected to email me your post as a Word document and the embedding information for your digital slide by Sunday evening at 5:00. It is expected that all students will read the student-authored essays prior to our meeting for class on Monday evenings. I will model the kind of questions I'd like you to ask for the first couple of weeks. Student-led discussions will begin on February 11th.

Design Analysis Paper: (80 points) Challenging the assumption that one "reads" books but "looks" at pictures, Hassett and Schieble argue that the texts contemporary adolescents "encounter today embody cues for reading that extend beyond the letters and words on the page, requiring readers to actively focus on textual elements beyond the decoding of print." In the case of graphic novels, pictures constitute one such textual element. This assignment asks you to apply your

understanding of the relationship between the *content* of a graphic novel and its *visual design* (an aspect of its *form*) and analyze the role an author's rhetorical choices play in allowing him/her to construct a theme. Prior to composing your paper, select what you regard as a key page in one of the graphic novels you read prior to the due date for the assignment. In constructing your argument, you'll need to: 1) contextualize the page for your audience by introducing and discussing (briefly) a theme it functions to develop in the narrative; 2) critically analyze the role elements of the page's *design* play in allowing the author to construct that theme, inserting individual panels in the flow of your text when appropriate (no more than four) and diagramming them to help your reader follow your discussion; 3) discuss the implications of the exercise for literacy teachers. In other words, what are the consequences for English teachers of acknowledging that contemporary teenagers interact with texts that require them to decode modes other than written language? You are free to select the graphic novel and the theme you explore in your paper. Attach a photocopy of the page you focus on as an appendix.

Graphic Literacy Narrative and Reflective Essay (150 points): This assignment builds on and extends the visual design analysis paper. In our quest to understand the challenges involved in reading and writing graphic narratives, you'll be asked to use Comic Life, a software program, to create an original comic book that presents a personal narrative. Prior to doing so, you'll be asked to develop a script to guide your story. Additionally, you'll be asked to compose a reflective paper in which you unpack the vision you worked toward in your comic book and analyze the rhetorical choices you made as a writer to bring it to fruition. Finally, you'll be asked to read a classmate's reflective essay and critique his/her comic book. You need not be an "artist" to complete this assignment, and you shouldn't feel any trepidation about doing so. Although you are welcome to incorporate original drawings in your comic book, you're also free to use photographs. More information will be provided about the assignment as the due date approaches, and one class meeting will be set aside to introduce Comic Life and allow you to begin working on your project. Beyond that, you'll need to reserve time in your schedule to finish your comic book in the Grad Ed computer lab. The finished comic books will be assembled and published on the course website.

Final Project: (100 points) In "Narrative in Comics," Henry Pratt characterizes comics as "a hybrid art form that employs narrative strategies closely connected to literature, on the one hand, and other pictorial narrative media, on the other." This hybridity leads some educators to question whether graphic novels, which emphasize the visual, are capable of challenging readers. Throughout the course, our focus will be on understanding how people make meaning when they read multimodal texts such as graphic novels. With this in mind, the final course project requires that you design and carry out a small-scale empirical study in which you examine how actual readers make sense of works written in the medium of comics. Consistent with the focus of the course, you'll be asked to construct your argument using a combination of words and pictures, and present your work when we meet for our final class.

Grading: Grades will be assigned based on the instructor's judgment as to whether the student has satisfied the stated objectives of the course in the following manner:

- A = 90-100% (421-470 pts.)
- B = 80-89% (374-420 pts.)
- C = 70-79% (327-373 pts.)
- D = 60-69% (280-326 pts.)
- F = 0-59% (0-279 pts.)

Course Schedule

Date	Topics To Be Covered	Reading Assignments	Assignments Due
1/25	<p>Course Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of Syllabus • A Brief History of Comics <p>EQs: What shifts have occurred in critical debates about comic books and graphic novels as a form of reading material, and what has motivated those shifts?</p>		
2/1	<p>The Language of Comics (Part I)</p> <p>EQs: By definition, what are comics, and what (if anything) is distinct about the form?</p> <p>EQs: What is the “language” of comics, and how does it influence the meanings that readers construct as they transact with graphic novels?</p>	<p>GN: Spiegelman, <i>Maus</i> McCloud, Chapters 1 and 2 Ewert, “Reading Visual Narrative”</p>	
2/8	<p>The Language of Comics (Part II)</p> <p>EQs: What is the “language” of comics, and how does it influence the meanings that readers construct as they transact with graphic novels?</p>	<p>GN: Small, <i>Stitches</i> McCloud, Chapters 5 Hassett & Schieble, “Finding Space”</p>	
2/15	<p>The Role of the Reader</p> <p>EQs: How do readers make meaning as they transact with multimodal texts? What metaphor best captures the processes readers engage in to construct meaning in their transactions with graphic novels?</p>	<p>GN: Moon & Ba, <i>Daytripper</i> McCloud, Chapters 3 and 4</p>	
2/22	<p>Reading by Design</p> <p>EQs: How do readers make meaning as they transact with multimodal texts? What metaphor best captures the processes readers engage in to construct meaning in their transactions with graphic novels?</p>	<p>GN: Lemire, <i>Trillium</i> Connors, “Designing Meaning”</p>	
2/29	<p>Image-Word Relationships</p> <p>EQs: How do word and image collaborate to create meaning?</p> <p>EQs: What is the “language” of comics, and how does it influence the meanings that readers construct as they transact with graphic novels?</p>	<p>GN: Kelly & Niimora, <i>I Kill Giants</i> McCloud, Ch. 6</p>	<p>Design Analysis Paper</p>
3/7	<p>Making Multimodal Meaning</p> <p>EQs: How can the concept of “design” serve as a framework for understanding how readers construct meaning in their transactions with graphic novels?</p>	<p>GN: Johnson, <i>Night Fisher</i> Connors, “Weaving Multimodal Meaning”</p>	
3/14	<p>Practicing Comics Criticism</p> <p>EQs: What does reading comics closely entail, and what are the implications for comics criticism?</p>	<p>GN: Gaiman & Russell, <i>Coraline</i> Connors, “Expanding Students Analytical Frameworks”</p>	<p>Script and Images for Graphic Literacy Narrative</p>
3/21	<p>No Class – Spring Break</p>		
3/28	<p>Coming of Age in Words and Pictures</p> <p>EQs: What does reading comics closely entail, and what are the implications for comics criticism?</p>	<p>GN: Backderf, <i>My Friend Dahmer</i> Earle, “Bildungsroman”</p>	<p>Graphic Literacy Narrative and Reflective Paper</p>
4/4	<p>No Class</p>		

4/11	Reading Superhero Comics Critically EQs What does reading comics closely entail, and what are the implications for comics criticism?	GN: Millar, <i>Superman: Red Son</i> Cates, “On the Literary Use of Superheroes”	
4/18	Practicing Comics Criticism EQs: What does reading comics closely entail, and what are the implications for comics criticism?	GN: Satrapi, <i>Persepolis</i> Robbins, “Using Graphic Memoirs to Discuss Social Justice Issues”	
4/25	Are Graphic Novels Art? EQs: In the case of graphic storytelling, what constitutes “excellence,” and how can it be measured?	GN: Lemire, <i>Essex County</i> Groensteen, “Why are Comics”	
5/2	Putting It All Together	McCloud, Chapter 9	Final Project

Note: The instructor reserves the right to alter the syllabus to accommodate disruptions to the class schedule and other unforeseen issues.