

HSS 404 – Graphic Novels, Comics and Cartoons

Section: 046

Time: Tuesday/Thursday 2:30 – 3:50

Room: FMH 319

Fall 2025

Instructor: Jake Slovis

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Office: Cullimore 115 D

Office Hours: Wednesday 2:30 – 4:30 and by appointment

Prerequisites:

ENGL 102 with a grade of C or higher, and 6 credits at the 300-level History and Humanities GER with a grade of C or higher; 3 credits at the 300-level may be taken concurrently as a co-requisite.

Course Description:

In this course, you will learn to evaluate, critique, and develop written arguments about comics and other visual mediums. Throughout the semester we will develop a working definition of comics and analyze the strategies that sequential artists use to create meaning in their work. The course is split into three units. The first unit addresses the rhetorical dimensions of comics and visual narratives. The second unit focuses on larger works—graphic novels and graphic memoirs. The final unit is devoted to developing a thesis-driven research paper that analyzes the themes and ideas discussed throughout the semester.

Learning Outcomes:

Conceptually, students should:

- Define comics as a medium
- Analyze the visual and narrative techniques used to create meaning in sequential art
- Practice writing as a process by using various brainstorming, invention, revision, and editing strategies
- Practice the conventions of written, spoken, and visual composition
- Create and construct sustained, analytical arguments about comics that synthesize complex ideas and draw on multiple sources for support
- Conduct, evaluate, and incorporate independent research in support of original arguments

Required Texts:

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*

Alan Moore. *V for Vendetta*

Tomine, Adrian. *Shortcomings*

Additional PDFs and links posted to Canvas

Participation and Low-Stakes Writing Assignments:

Participation will be evaluated based on your active involvement in class discussions and your submission of low-stakes writing assignments. Low-stakes writing assignments will not receive a formal letter grade. Instead, they will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- *Satisfactory* work demonstrates a thoughtful response to writing prompts and is turned in on time. You will receive full credit for satisfactory work.
- Work that is *Marginal* is submitted on time but is either seriously underdeveloped or only responds to part of the prompts. You will receive half credit for Marginal work.
- *Unacceptable* work ignores instruction or is submitted well after the due date of the assignment.

Please be aware that these low-stakes assignments combine to make up 10% of your final grade. It is therefore imperative that you demonstrate consistency in these assignments and submit them on time. Late assignments will be assessed as follows:

- Work submitted within one week of the due date will be evaluated for partial credit.
- Work submitted over a week late will receive no credit.

Attendance and Excused Absences:

Attendance is critical to your success in this class. Participation in in-class activities, discussions, and workshops will contribute to your knowledge, ability, and performance. At a minimum, this means showing up on time, being prepared, and contributing to class discussions. Your level of engagement with the material will subsequently impact how much you get from the class.

You are permitted three absences—for each additional absence you may be penalized a half letter grade. Six or more absences may result in a failing grade. Classes will start on time. Two late arrivals (more than ten minutes late) will count as one absence. Arrivals more than twenty minutes late will be marked as an absence.

If you require an excused absence due to illness (COVID related or other) or other extenuating circumstances, you must contact the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students will verify your documentation and notify instructors. Accommodations for making up missed classes and assignments will be at the discretion of the instructor. You will not receive an excused absences without verification from the Dean of Students Office.

Students who expect to miss class for religious observances must submit a written list of dates that will be missed by the end of our second week of class.

Formal Projects:

You will have four formal projects throughout the semester. These assignments will be evaluated according to project rubrics, which will also be posted on Canvas, and will be given a letter grade. Full details on these projects will be uploaded to Canvas.

Grade Breakdown:

Project 1— Analysis Paper 20%
Project 2— Annotated Bibliography 15%
Project 3— Research Paper 35%
Project 4— Oral Presentation 10%
Low-Stakes Assignments 10%
Attendance and Participation 10%

Final grades are evaluated according to the following grading scale:

A = 100-90.00	B+ = 89.99-87.00	B = 86.99-80.00	C+ = 79.99-77.00	C = 76.99-70.00	D = 69.99-60.00	F = 59.99-0
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All work must be submitted by the last day of class. Makeup work will not be accepted after final grades have been submitted.

Please Note: I do not give extra credit, particularly for those who have failed to fulfill the participation aspect of this course. Regular participation is essential to academic growth.

Midterm and Final: There is no scheduled midterm or final exam for this class. Instead, the analytical paper and research paper act as your midterm and final assessments.

NJIT University Code on Academic Integrity:

Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following the academic code of integrity policy that is found at:

<http://www5.njit.edu/policies/sites/policies/files/academic-integrity-code.pdf>

Please note that it is my professional obligation and responsibility to report any academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at dos@njit.edu.

All assignments submitted shall be considered "graded work" and all aspects of your coursework are covered by the Code on Academic Integrity. Written and visual works are to be completed individually unless otherwise specified.

Artificial Intelligence:

This class follows the following guidelines from the NJIT University Code of Academic Integrity:

“Artificial intelligence usage is not permitted in this course. The expectation of this course is for students to work through the course without assistance from any type of artificial intelligence to better develop their own skills in this content area. As such, artificial intelligence usage is not permitted throughout this course.”

Student Accommodations:

Every attempt will be made to accommodate qualified students with disabilities. If you are a student in need of accommodations contact Office of Accessibility Resources and Services at 973-596-5417.

The Writing Center:

The Writing Center (Central King Building G17) is available for individual and group appointments with professional writing tutors both onsite and online. This resource is intended to help you improve your communication and writing skills. Tutors help with planning assignments, improving your writing, refining an essay or multimedia project, or other communication-based needs. For more information, please visit <http://humanities.njit.edu/writingcenter>.

Important Dates:

January	20	Monday	Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
January	21	Tuesday	First Day of Classes
January	25	Saturday	Saturday Classes Begin
January	27	Monday	Last Day to Add/Drop a Class

January	27	Monday	Last Day for 100% Refund, Full or Partial Withdrawal
January	28	Tuesday	W Grades Posted for Course Withdrawals
February	3	Monday	Last Day for 90% Refund, Full or Partial Withdrawal, No Refund for Partial Withdrawal after this date
February	17	Monday	Last Day for 50% Refund, Full Withdrawal
March	10	Monday	Last Day for 25% Refund, Full Withdrawal
March	16	Sunday	Spring Recess Begins - No Classes Scheduled - Univ Open
March	22	Saturday	Spring Recess Ends
April	3	Thursday	Wellness Day - No Classes Scheduled - University Open
April	7	Monday	Last Day to Withdraw
April	18	Friday	Good Friday - No Classes Scheduled - University Closed
April	20	Sunday	Easter Sunday - No Classes Scheduled - University Closed
May	6	Tuesday	Thursday Classes Meet
May	7	Wednesday	Friday Classes Meet
May	7	Wednesday	Last Day of Classes

Course Schedule:

Please note: All readings and low-stakes assignments will be posted to Canvas. This schedule is tentative and subject to change. Please rely on Canvas for updates on these materials.

Week	Unit 1: In this unit, we will work to develop a class-wide lexicon for analyzing and evaluating comics.
1	Topic: What are Comics? What are Cartoons? 1/21: Class Introductions. Discuss <i>New York Drawings</i> Excerpt. 1/23: Douglas Wolk, “What Comics Are and What They Aren’t”
2	Topic: The Language of Comics

	<p>1/28: <i>Understanding Comics</i>, Chapters 1-4</p> <p>1/31: Brook Gladstone, “The Great Refusal”</p>
3	<p>Topic: Signs and Symbols</p> <p>2/4: <i>Understanding Comics</i>, Chapters 5-9</p> <p>2/6: Ronald Wimberly, “Lighten Up” https://thenib.com/lighten-up-4f7f96ca8a7e/</p> <p>“Walking in Circles” https://www.andersbrekhusnilsen.com/blog/2019/7/16/the-same-room-twice</p> <p>Instagram Comics by the Fakepan (Reviewed in class)</p>
4	<p>Topic: Comics in Social and Political Contexts</p> <p>2/11: Links and Videos to be reviewed in Class</p> <p>2/13: Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” & Peter Kuper, “A Hunger Artist”</p>
5	<p>Topic: Visual vs. Written Communication</p> <p>2/18: Reading TBD</p> <p>2/20: Reading TBD</p> <p>Analytical Essay Draft Due</p>

Week	Unit 2: In this unit, we will apply the analytical framework developed in unit 1 to three larger works. I will add supplementary materials to Canvas to help guide us through our class discussions.
6	<p>2/25: Bechdel, Alison. <i>Fun Home</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p> <p>2/27: Research Paper Thesis Construction Discussion</p> <p>Analytical Paper Due</p>
7	<p>3/4: Bechdel, Alison. <i>Fun Home</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p> <p>3/6: Scholarly Articles About <i>Fun Home</i></p>
8	<p>3/11: Tomine, Adrian. <i>Shortcomings</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p> <p>3/13: Tomine, Adrian. <i>Shortcomings</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p>
Spring Break	

9	3/25: Alan Moore. <i>V for Vendetta</i> (Chapters to be assigned) 3/27: Alan Moore. <i>V for Vendetta</i> (Chapters to be assigned)
10	4/1: Alan Moore. <i>V for Vendetta</i> (Chapters to be assigned) 4/3: Wellness day. No Classes Scheduled.

Week	Unit 3: This unit will focus on developing an original argument-driven research paper.
11	4/8: Scholarly Articles Discussion Groups 4/10: Scholarly Articles Discussion Groups Annotated Bibliography Due
12	4/15: Reading TBD 4/17: Research and Writing Discussions and Conferences
13	4/22: Research and Writing Discussions and Conferences 4/24: Presentations
14	4/29: Presentations 5/1: Presentations
15	5/6: Presentations Research Paper Due