

HSS 404 – Graphic Novels, Comics and Cartoons

Section: 057

Time: Monday and Thursday 2:30 - 3:50

Room: CKB 114

Fall 2025

Instructor: Jake Slovis

Email: Slovis@njit.edu

Office: Cullimore 115D

Office Hours: Tuesday 4:00 - 6:00 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 absence 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.

Student Absences for Religious Observance

NJIT is committed to supporting students [observing religious holidays](#). Students must notify their instructors in writing of any conflicts between course requirements and religious observances, ideally by the end of the second week of classes and no later than two weeks before the anticipated absence. When properly notified in writing two weeks in advance, I will provide academically reasonable accommodations, allowing students to complete missed assignments, exams, quizzes, or other coursework within the term.

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

In this class, you may not use generative AI composition. Unless given explicit permission by the instructor, all generative AI use is forbidden, including use of Grammarly, or Undetectable, or similar tools to rewrite sentences. All assignments must be submitted on Canvas, which automatically assesses for plagiarism and AI generation using Turnitin. Unauthorized use of generative AI is a violation of the Code of Academic Integrity. Students in violation of the rules of academic integrity will be reported to the Dean of Students who will follow up with a meeting and a final determination of grade and status in the 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 and 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>.

NEED HELP? KNOW WHO TO CALL

Please note following important numbers that will come in handy in case of emergency:

EXTERNAL RESOURCES	AVAILABILITY	CONTACT NUMBER
Suicide Prevention	24 hrs/ 7 days a week	(973) 623-2323 (University Hospital-Newark)
Drug/ Alcohol Addiction	24 hrs/ 7 days a week	(877) 630-8262
Crime Victim Compensation Office	Monday – Friday 8 AM – 8 PM	(877) 658-2221
Rape Care Center	24 hrs/ 7 days a week	(877) 733-2273 (Essex County)
Sexual Assault Hotline	24 hrs/ 7 days a week	(800) 656-HOPE (National)
Psychiatric Emergency	24 hrs/ 7 days a week	(973) 924-7416 (Newark Beth Israel Hospital)
NJIT RESOURCES	AVAILABILITY	CONTACT NUMBER
NJIT Public Safety	24 hrs/ 7 days a week	(973) 596-3111 (Emergency) (973) 596-3120 (Non-Emergency)
Dean of Students (TITLE IX – Sexual Misconduct Report/Response)	Monday – Friday 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM	(973) 596-3466
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)	Monday – Friday 8:30 AM - 5 PM	(973) 596-3414
Student Health Services (SHS)	Monday – Friday 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM	(973) 596-3621

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? 9/4: Class Introductions. Discuss <i>New York Drawings</i> Excerpt
2	Topic: The Language of Comics 9/8: Douglas Wolk, “What Comics Are and What They Aren’t” 9/11: <i>Understanding Comics</i> , Chapters 1-4
3	Topic: Signs and Symbols 9/15: Brook Gladstone, “The Great Refusal” 9/18: <i>Understanding Comics</i> , Chapters 5-9
4	Topic: Comics in Social and Political Contexts 9/22: Ronald Wimberly, “Lighten Up”

	<p>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 and awardsforgoodboys (Reviewed in class)</p> <p>9/25: Links and Videos to be reviewed in Class</p>
5	<p>Topic: Visual vs. Written Communication</p> <p>9/29: Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” & Peter Kuper “A Hunger Artist”</p> <p>10/2: Wellness day. No class.</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>10/6: Analytical Essay Draft Due</p> <p>10/9: Bechdel, Alison. <i>Fun Home</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p>
7	<p>10/13: Research Paper Thesis Construction Discussion</p> <p>Analytical Paper Due</p> <p>10/16: Bechdel, Alison. <i>Fun Home</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p>
8	<p>10/20: Scholarly Articles About <i>Fun Home</i></p> <p>10/23: Tomine, Adrian. <i>Shortcomings</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p>
9	<p>10/27: Tomine, Adrian. <i>Shortcomings</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p> <p>10/30: Alan Moore. <i>V for Vendetta</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p>
10	<p>11/3: Alan Moore. <i>V for Vendetta</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p> <p>11/6: Alan Moore. <i>V for Vendetta</i> (Chapters to be assigned)</p>

Week	Unit 3: This unit will focus on developing an original argument-driven research paper.
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11	11/10 Scholarly Articles Discussion Groups 11/13: Scholarly Articles Discussion Groups Annotated Bibliography Due
12	11/17: Reading TBD 11/20: Research and Writing Discussions and Conferences
13	11/24: Research and Writing Discussions and Conferences 11/25: Research and Writing Discussions and Conferences (Thursday classes meet) Thanksgiving Recess
14	12/1: Presentations 12/4: Presentations
15	12/8: Presentations 12/11: Presentations Research Paper Due