English 408C: Rhetoric of Digital Design  
—Theory and Practice

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http://www.english.uwaterloo.ca/~ahm/408c

Welcome to English 408c Rhetoric of Digital Design!

Please feel free to contact me with any concerns or questions you have about the class,  
the readings, or the assignments. I will be in my office during the hours noted, and I’m  
always very happy to have students drop by during these times, or by appointment at  
other times. Beyond office hours, contact is probably best initiated via email. I will read  
your emails within one day, and will try to respond within two business days.

Course description:

This course will address some of the basic tools and techniques for digital media  
projects — composition, text, colour, graphics, site design, multimedia, usability,  
interactivity — as well as some of the technical and structural issues faced by many  
developers of academic and commercial digital media publications. One of our key  
concerns will be the fundamentals of design — how best to present complex information  
(the kind that scholarly as well as commercial digital work tends to produce) in  
accessible, appropriate, and possibly even beautiful, ways. Along the way, we will  
reference the critical literature on digital design and practice, humanities computing, and  
information design and delivery.

Course meeting times

The course meets once weekly, Monday evenings from 6:00 until 8:50pm, in the FLEX  
lab, 3rd floor, Dana Porter Library.

Required and Recommended texts

The following texts are required for this course. They are available at the University  
Bookstore in South Campus Hall now. Please buy them, and bring them to class as the  
assigned readings dictate.


The course has a significant ‘digital courseware’ component on the class website—here you will find software tutorials, lecture notes, and examples galore. We will often be **reading pieces accessible online**: be sure to print copies to bring to class, or take notes from which you can make clear reference to the text. Links to these texts are provided from the website listed in the contact information above. Many offer essential visual examples of design concepts and will greatly help you to understand the material. Be sure to follow the links!

**Assignments and Mark Distribution**

The following are the graded components of the course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation / Attendance</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>(ongoing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Concept</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>12 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Project</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2 April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Proposal</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>28 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress report/mockup</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
<td>14 March</td>
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</tbody>
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**Participation / Attendance:** Your participation in this course will be measured by three factors: whether you come to class (attendance sheets), whether you are prepared to participate (in-class critiques, productivity during in-class exercises), and the quality of this participation (effort as well as accomplishment). As far as attendance is concerned, you will lose one point for each unexplained absence from class. If you leave halfway through class, you will lose one point. Participation will be assessed on a positive basis, as described above—thoughtful comments and energetic completion of in-class work trump doodling and email-checking.

**Visual Concept:** You will use visual language (composition, colour, shape, texture) to evoke an abstract concept: an emotion, a mental state, an idea. Your presentation will take the form of a PowerPoint slideshow limited to 10 slides, with no more than 10 words of text, and presented to the class in a 6-8 minute show. A detailed handout will more comprehensively explain what is required of your project.

**Final Project:** Your final project will take the form of a carefully planned and instantiated digital design. Your project might be a website, a database, a user interface, an animation, or a hypertext; no matter what the medium, it will have a clear purpose, topic, and audience. You will be assessed on how well the form and content of your project serves the goals articulated in your proposal. The digital component will be presented to the class in demo form in Week 12; the to-be-graded version will comprise a disk containing the digital materials, as well as a short paper describing the rationale (design decisions and technical choices).
The project might be a solo or a group undertaking, depending on the scale of the proposal. A detailed handout will more comprehensively explain what is required of your project.

**Project Proposal:** The project proposal is an essential component of the term’s work; digital design work proceeds from careful re-iterations of an original goal and plan on paper, to careful re-iterations of the instantiation of this goal and plan in digital form. Without a clear goal worked out and planned on paper, you’ll never manage to get a digital project done. This proposal, then, will lay out the purpose and topic of your final project, and suggest the technologies to be used to construct it, as well as a timeline for the accomplishment of project milestones.

**Progress Report:** Several weeks before the projects are due, you will provide me with a report detailing your progress—this assignment is meant to ensure that you are devoting adequate time to the project well in advance of the deadline, and will also have the happy effect of giving you time to recover from technical problems or insoluble design issues. *The progress report is not graded, but if you do not complete it, you will lose 10% from your final project grade.*

**Absence and Late Policy**

Absence from class requires advance permission: I’m always happier to hear about an absence or a conflict earlier rather than later. Absences should have compelling reasons: “I’m really busy with assignments in all my other courses” is not a legitimate excuse, for example. Medical absences must be documented by a doctor’s note. Remember that missing one class in a course that meets only once a week is essentially missing a whole week’s worth of class—1/12th of your semester!

Assignments are due in the form and at the time/location specified on the assignment sheets—please take note of this. *Because assignments are presented in workshop format to the class, there can be no extensions on projects.*

**Rights and Responsibilities**

Every member of this class—instructors as well as students—has rights and responsibilities to ensure a pleasant and productive experience for all. We are all answerable to University policies governing ethical behaviour (Policy 33) and academic integrity (Policy 71), as well as to those outlining grievance or dispute procedures (Policy 70). Here are some more specific expectations for this course:

You will:

- know the university policies that govern your behaviour
- attend all scheduled classes
• arrive prepared: with assigned reading and writing completed, and with the textbook and/or coursepack in hand
• participate actively in your own learning, while respecting the rights of others to learn as well: this means active listening as well as active speaking
• give thoughtful consideration to instructor feedback on written and oral work

I will:

• adhere to the university policies that govern my behaviour
• attend all scheduled classes
• make myself available for consultation in person and over email
• return assignments of 1 page or less within one week, and all others within 2 weeks
• provide helpful and respectful feedback on student work

The Faculty of Arts, which administers this course and is responsible to ensure adherence to codes of academic conduct, requires that the following paragraphs appear in this syllabus:

“Note on avoidance of academic offences: All students registered in the courses of the Faculty of Arts are expected to know what constitutes an academic offence, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their academic actions. When the commission of an offence is established, disciplinary penalties will be imposed in accord with Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline). For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students are directed to consult the summary of Policy #71 which is supplied in the Undergraduate Calendar (section 1; on the Web at http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infoucal/UW/policy_71.html).

“If you need help in learning how to avoid offences such as plagiarism, cheating, and double submission, or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your TA or course instructor for guidance. Other resources regarding the discipline policy are your academic advisor and the Undergraduate Associate Dean.

“Students who believe that they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve; refer to Policy #70, Student Grievance, http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.html.”

Students seeking guidance on academic honesty are urged to discuss the issue with their instructor, or to consult the following page of the Arts Faculty Web site, "How to Avoid Plagiarism and Other Written Offences: A Guide for Students and Instructors" (http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~sager/plagiarism.html)
Class Schedule

Week 1: Introduction
- General overview of the course, introduction of key concepts
- Workshop: examining various digital media projects
- Task: web site critique; what is digital media

Week 2: Composition and Visual Literacy
- Read: DDB, “A New History for a New Medium”; Dondis excerpt in coursepak
- Workshop: Deciphering connotative and denotative meaning in visual images
- Task: create visual message

Week 3: Text
- Read: Williams, Laurel, Hayles, Dair excerpts in coursepak
- Workshop: Physiological quirks of reading; emotional quirks of type
- Task: Create meaningful text … without linguistic content

Week 4: Colour
- Read: DDB, “Mastering Colour”
- Workshop: optical illusions with colour, colour field theory
- Task: work on Visual Concept assignment

Week 5: Graphics
- Read: DDB, “Digital Imaging”
- Workshop: building graphics with Fireworks
- Task: supply banner graphics for provided web page

Week 6: PROJECT PRESENTATIONS: VISUAL CONCEPT

Week 7: Site Design and Prototyping
- Read: DDB, “Web Design”
- Workshop: building web sites with Dreamweaver
- Task: further conceptualize final project

Week 8: Multi-media—sound, video, animation, photography
- Read: DDB, “Multimedia Design”, online articles
- Workshop: optimizing photographs for digital use; simple animations; finding sounds
- Task: incorporating media into a web site

Week 9: “Usability”
- Read: online articles by Nielsen, others
- Workshop: when usability is not what you want …
- Task: evaluate usability of common objects; demonstrate
Week 10: User Testing
  - Read: online articles and rubrics for testing
  - Workshop: undertake usability tests of various sites
  - Task: design user questionnaire to test your own project

Week 11: Interactivity
  - Workshop: counters, blogs, forms, wikis, games ... the works!
  - Task: work on final projects

Week 12: *PRESENTATION OF TERM WORK*