

Bill Wolff
Visual Rhetoric and Multimodal Composition, Spring 2010
Syllabus

Course Info

Course Location: Education Hall 2095

Office Location: Education Hall 3075

Contact: wolffw@rowan.edu, @billwolff

Course Web Sites: <http://williamwolff.org/courses/vrmc-spring-2010/>
<http://youtube.com/user/wolffvrmcs10>

Course Hours: H 6:30 – 9:00pm

Office Hours: T 1:30 – 3:00, H 3:00 – 4:30
or by appointment

Office Phone: 856-256-5221 (email, first)

Course Description

Writing, in our highly mediated, highly visual culture, is no longer just about using a keyboard to put words on a screen nor about using a pen to put words on paper. Writing is composing—in all the forms, media, modes, and genres we can think of. It is multimodal. That is, it brings together images (still and moving), words, and music. When composing such visual texts to make an argument, a host of rhetorical strategies are used, ranging from placement of texts on page to consideration of audience to the media used to write and present the text.

In this course we will consider the impact of the pervasiveness of the visual in contemporary society by reading theoretical texts on the subject of visual rhetoric and multimodal composition; reading historical and contemporary multimodal texts and texts heavy in visual rhetoric; and composing texts that contain multiple modes of communication using multiple media technologies.

Through our readings and projects we will gain critical and practical skills to become better consumers and creators of visual texts.

Brief Descriptions of Course Units and Projects

Unit I. Contexts, Semiotics, and Modalities

In this unit, we will be introduced to theories on semiotics and multimodal composition. The unit will ground the discussion of the visual with texts that consider the role of the image in writing and contemporary. Students will compose a semiotic analysis of one of the most visited visual blogs: PostSecret.

Unit II. Visual Rhetoric

In this unit, we will read theory on visual rhetoric, particular the rhetoric of photography, and will compose our own visual arguments in the form of a photo essay. The texts will be showcased in an online blog space and will be accompanied by an oral analysis of the work.

Unit III. Remixing

Contemporary culture is participatory; people create their own entertainment and distribute it online for others to enjoy, critique, or ignore. Much of this entertainment takes older media and represents it in a new way that often adds a new layer of social commentary. This is called

remixing. In this unit, we will compose a 3 – 5 minute video that remixes still and moving images to make a comment about contemporary society. The videos will be posted to YouTube. The movie will be accompanied by a rhetorical reflection.

Unit IV. The Potential for and of Multimodal Texts

In this unit, we will expand our understanding of the potential for multimodal texts by exploring issues of gender and race. We will read comics theory as well as an innovative, experimental, and fascinating mode of news reporting. Students will compose an in-depth multimodal document in the medium of their choice grounded in the theories and practices learned in the course. The document will be accompanied by a rhetorical reflection.

Required Texts and Materials

Blake, W. (1994). *The marriage of heaven and hell: A facsimile in full color*. New York: Dover.

Evans, J., & Hall, S. Eds. (1999). *Visual culture: The reader*. London: SAGE.

Hall, S. (2007). *This means that: A user's guide to semiotics*. London: Lawrence King.

Kirshner, M. MacKinnan, J.B., Shoebridge, P., & Simons, M. (2008). *I live here*. New York: Pantheon Books.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York: HarperPerennial.

In an effort to reduce textbook costs, multiple readings that will be available for free online on the Readings page (password protected).

You will also need access to:

- Computer with Internet access
- Microsoft Word or any of many online alternatives (see <http://j.mp/4LnxAW>; I do not accept Word Perfect files)
- Rowan email address
- film or digital camera (cell phone camera is fine)
- possibly a scanner (these are available in all Rowan computer labs)
- USB flash drive with no less than 8GB of memory (to use as backup and transfer digital photos and movie files from home to school and back again)
- Other materials as needed

Semester-long Projects

Discussion Leader

Starting the second week of the course, each week will have at least one discussion leader who will introduce and lead a discussion about the assigned text(s). The leader will make a 10-minute opening statement about the text(s). The presentation must contain at least the following: an overview of the goals of the text(s), an overview of the main points/arguments made by the author(s), a discussion of the theories the author(s) uses to contextualize the arguments made in the text(s), a discussion of some of the places in the text that were particularly challenging, and some questions that you might have about the text. Accompanying the presentation will be a handout that lists key terms and ideas the author(s) introduce, as well as their definitions as understood by the presenter. These materials will help ground the discussion.

Some of you have participated in similar activities in other classes with mixed results. Let me explain that I ask for some decorum in our conversations (this decorum is to extend to online spaces, as well). We come to this course with varying levels of expertise and various backgrounds academically. Let us respect all of those positions. No question is stupid if it is related to the readings and all responses should be valid ones. We are to use this element of the course to enrich our understanding of the material.

While there are no stupid questions, there are more effective questions to encourage richer discussions. Please refrain from discussion that will elicit or center on whether or not you liked or disliked the text. It is true that some texts are more attractive than others. Ultimately, however, whether we like the text or not doesn't matter, and such discussions become rather tiresome. What does matter is how the text furthers the overall goals of the class, asks us to reconsider previous understandings and rethink the other texts we read, and so on. Because we will be discussion of the texts on our blog (which you then will have the opportunity to announce on Twitter) our ideas will be open will be open to a discussion by a larger readership, as well. So, be sure that your reviews are grounded in the text and not in your own life.

Blogging

This semester the class will name and design a Wordpress blog. The ultimate URL will be: <http://nameyouchoose.wordpress.com>. As a group we will decide on a name relating to the overall theme of the course, choose a theme, add widgets, and so on. We will be doing this as we are composing our blog entries. It will, then, be a work in progress with its development evolving as we add texts. By completing this project will be learn about the visual and multimodal literacy that comes with some basic web site design.

Each student will be responsible for at least 2 blog posts and 2 blog post responses per week except for the week when the student is discussion leader. Each student will post to kinds of posts for the weeks they are post: 1) one that extends the class discussion, and 2) one that explores a particular area of visual rhetoric and/or multimodal composition.

Posts that extend class discussion should take what we have discussed in class about a text or series of texts and continue the discussion. Often in class we will come up with a list of questions that are raised by the text. A post might address one of those questions.

Posts that explore a particular area of visual rhetoric and/or multimodal composition: Each student will choose a mode of visual communication and each week will compose a post that explores an example of that visual in terms of the theories read, social implications, historical and political contexts, and so on. Examples of modes can be analyzed: magazine covers (either generally or within a single magazine), children's book covers and/or illustrations, advertisements (TV, magazine or other), products and product packaging, mappings, video games, and so on. The choice of which to analyze is up to the student, though I'd like each of the above to be covered by at least one student. The texts analyzed can be archival or contemporary. The post should contain at least one image or video of the text being discussed.

See the course web site home page for blog post examples.

@Twittering #vrmcs10

Twittering is micro-blogging, a form of communication that, like text messages, uses only 140 characters (including spaces), and it is quickly becoming the communication medium of choice for people around the world. According to Hubspot's "State of the Twittersphere" for the 4th Quarter of 2008, "Twitter has about 4-5 million users, about 30% are relatively new or unengaged users; An estimated 5-10 thousand new accounts are opened per day; Traffic has grown over 600% in the past 12 months (Compete.com); Twitter.com became one of the top 1,000 websites by traffic in May 2008 (Alexa.com)." As of January 12, 2010, Alexa ranked Twitter the 12th most visited site on the Web.

Twitter is, in short, a phenomenon—and as a result we are going to create professional Twitter accounts so that we might be able to engage with people in the visual rhetoric field and communicate with each other more easily outside of class. There is no Twitter requirement and you will not be graded for using it. However, I do encourage you to think about using it as a way to broadcast your blog posts, continue discussion outside of class, contact me with questions about class, and engage with your own professional community.

Office Hours

Office hours are designed for you, giving you a more private environment in which we may talk about your work, your performance in class, etc. If you are unable to see me during my office hours, do not hesitate to make an appointment to see me at a different time. My office hours are T 1:30 – 3:00, H 3:00 – 4:30 and by appointment.

Contacting Each Other

There will be times during the semester when I will need to contact the class and you will need to contact me. I will contact you via your Rowan email account, so please be sure that you are checking it regularly and/or forwarding it to the email service you use most regularly. I am in my office only during office hours and the brief times before and after class. As a result, calling me in my office will not get you an immediate response.

I strongly suggest you contact me via email or Twitter, which I check all day long. Email, however, tends to be seen as an informal medium. This, however, should not always be the case. All emails that I send to you will have a meaningful subject line and a proper salutation ("Hi Class," or "Hi Jane," etc.). The first sentence will notify you of the purpose of the email, and then will get to the heart of the matter. It will end with a formal closing ("Thanks, BW"). I expect the same from any email you send. Any email that does not will immediately be deleted and not responded to.

Students with Disabilities

Your academic success is important. If you have a documented disability that may have an impact upon your work in this class, please contact me. Students must provide documentation of their disability to the Academic Success Center in order to receive official University services and accommodations. The Academic Success Center can be reached at 856.256.4234. The Center is located on the 3rd Floor of Savitz Hall. The staff is available to answer questions regarding accommodations or assist you in your pursuit of accommodations. We look forward to working with you to meet your learning goals.

Attendance and Late Work

You are expected to attend class every day. You cannot pass this class if you miss more than 25% of the scheduled meeting times, including excused and unexcused absences. For our section, which meets once a week, the **maximum number of permissible absences is 3**.

Excused Absences

You will be permitted to make up missed work for excused absences only. These include:

- religious observances
- official University activities
- illness
- death of a family member or loved one
- inclement weather

You must provide verifiable documentation. Consult with your instructor for what is considered acceptable.

In the case of religious observances or official University activities, you must inform your instructor **in advance** of your absence for it to be excused.

In the case of illness, death of a family member or loved one, or inclement weather, you must inform your instructor as soon as possible after the fact.

If the events described above lead to your exceeding the maximum absence limit, you will be referred to the Dean of Students for a hardship withdrawal from the class.

Excused and Unexcused absences will be treated using the following scale:

1 or fewer	no penalty
2 absences	-2/3 final grade (a B would become a C+)
3 absences	-1 1/3 final grade (a B would become a C-)

This rate of deduction continues until reaching the maximum, after which you will receive an F for the course.

Course Strands

In this course all work will be dedicated to students developing their skills in the following Course Strands:

Multimodality: Students will gain greater familiarity the theories and practices relating to the use of multiple modes in the construction of texts.

Rhetoric: Students will gain greater familiarity the theories and practices relating to visual constructions of meaning.

Critical Reading, Thinking, and Writing: Students will develop their ability to read judiciously, think about, filter information about, and write about texts in a variety of genres and media.

Technology: Students will learn about and will use contemporary communication technologies in a variety of settings.

Collaboration: Students will develop their ability to work collaboratively in a variety of in- and out-of-class activities and settings.

Grading

Final grades will be calculated in the following way:

Semiotic Analysis of PostSecret	15%
Photo Essay	15%
Remix	20%
In-depth Multimodal Composition	30%
Blogging	15%
Discussion Lead / Contribution to Class Discussions	5%
Total	100%

Grades will be determined on the following scale:

A+ 100;	A 96	B- 82	D+ 69
A- 92		C+ 79	D 66
B+ 89		C 76	D- 62
B 86		C- 72	F 59 and below

Detailed criteria will be provided for each assignment. For every missing major assignment, your grade will be lowered by one full letter grade. For every 3 late non-major assignments, your final grade will be lowered by one full letter grade. It is better to complete an assignment late than to not complete it at all.

Major Assignments will be assessed according to the following grading criteria:

- A, A-** Represents outstanding participation in all assignment-related activities; all assigned work completed, with very high quality in all work produced for the assignment. Work at this level demonstrates activity that goes significantly beyond the required assignment work in one or more Course Strand.
- B+, B, B-** Represents excellent participation in all assignment-related activities; all assigned work completed, with consistently high quality in assignment work. Work at this

level demonstrates activity that goes beyond the required assignment work in one or more Course Strand.

- C+, C, C-** Represents good participation in all assignment-related activities; all assigned work completed, with generally good quality overall in assignment work.
- D+, D, D-** Represents uneven participation in all assignment activities; some gaps in assigned work completed, with inconsistent quality in assignment work.
- F** Represents minimal participation in all-assignment activities; serious gaps in assigned work completed, or very low quality in assignment work.

Final grades correspond to the Graduate Handbook (A-C) for graduate students. All work is expected to be the student's own. Any plagiarism—intended or not—will result in a failing grade for the course.