

Introduction to Comics

ENGL 20

Spring 2026 Section 01 In Person 3 Unit(s) 01/22/2026 to 05/11/2026 Modified 01/22/2026

Contact Information

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Office: Faculty Office Building (FOB) 216

Office Hours

Monday, Wednesday, 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM, Zoom

<https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/89770941217?pwd=ob2FfnsEGg7gPVC7VAthuckBM8s6Qq.1>
(<https://sjsu.zoom.us/j/89770941217?pwd=ob2FfnsEGg7gPVC7VAthuckBM8s6Qq.1>)

Course Information

English 20: Intro to Comics teaches students critical approaches to reading, analyzing, and responding to comic art. We will begin by exploring comics studies as an emerging, evolving, and interdisciplinary field of study. We will read foundational theory, oftentimes thinking with and through the comics form, that will teach us how to understand and analyze how comics work and create meaning. Alongside these works of criticism and theory, we will read a variety of comic art (editorial cartoons, newspaper strips, comic books, graphic novels/narratives, and webcomics) that will move us through the historical and creative development of comics, as an art form, in the United States. Many of these works will explore questions of identity and belonging, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality, among others. Together, we will develop our close reading (and viewing), critical thinking, and scholarly writing skills throughout the course and will showcase their learning through analytical writing as well as comics making.

Lecture, Discussion, & Creative Activities

Tuesday, Thursday, 10:30 AM to 11:45 AM, Boccardo Business Center (BBC) 225

Course Description and Requisites

Introduces students to a historical, formal, and scholarly understanding of comics as an artform and medium, including cartoons, comic strips, comic books, graphic novels/narratives, and webcomics.

Satisfies GE Area: 3B. Humanities (Formerly Area C2).

Grading: Letter Graded

* Classroom Protocols

Attendance

Regular attendance is vital to your learning and success in the course. We don't want to miss out on the opportunity to learn from/with you! If you are sick, or are unable to make it to class for whatever reason, you can catch up on the material you missed on our course Canvas page, via a friend/peer, and/or in my office hours or by appointment.

Preparation & Participation

We all have a responsibility and an opportunity to be an active participant in our own learning and to contribute to the knowledge that we'll create together in this class! Please come prepared to do so. This means that you've completed the assigned reading for the day in advance of class; you have access to those readings during our class discussion; and you have basic materials like pen/pencil, your composition notebook, and a device if you would like or are requested.

Devices

You are welcome to use larger devices like a tablet or laptop for class-specific activities, but please refrain from using your cell phone. Please be present and help create a respectful and distraction-free class by using your devices for class work only during our time together.

Engaging in Class Discussion & Building Community

Our class will require participation and collaboration and will issues of race and ethnicity, national identity, gender, sexuality, and genocide. I recognize that it can be challenging to discuss some of these topics in a public space like the classroom and that we all approach these topics and the texts we read from our own unique perspectives and experiences. I encourage you to engage in these discussions to the degree you feel comfortable, to connect what we read to your own life and to the world around you, and to listen to and learn from your peers with respect and care. We will continue to discuss our collective goals around engaging in class discussion and building community throughout the semester.

Course Communication & Emails

All course materials can be found on Canvas. Please check both our course Canvas and your email regularly to stay up to date. For help with using Canvas see [Canvas Student Resources page](#).

Please be aware that I do not respond to emails outside of traditional business hours, M-F 9-5. I encourage you to also maintain professional boundaries around email and step away from it when you can/need. Unless it is a weekend or I am sick or away for travel, I should respond to your message within 48 hours. If you worry that I haven't seen or responded to your email, please do not hesitate to send me a follow up.

When you email me, I'd appreciate it if you included a specific subject that states the purpose of your email as well as a greeting, message, and your name.

Academic Originality, Honesty, and AI

Comics studies is an interdisciplinary field that asks fans and scholars to think critically about how comics and graphic narratives communicate ideas and create meaning. I want you to engage in that process in your own critical, original, and creative way. In short, I want to hear what you, and only you, have to say. While AI is now an unavoidable part of our reality, it is important that we understand how AI works and the ethical and environmental issues it raises. There are two types of AI tools, generative AI (which processes large amounts of text in order to learn and predict patterns and generate new content) and assistive AI (which do not produce content but helps users refine the content they've created).

Generative AI Tools are any platform that creates content based on user inputs and prompts (e.g., ChatGPT, JASPER, Bard, DeepMind, DALL-E, some functions of Grammarly, etc.). Generative AI for many assignments is the antithesis of the kind of learning we are engaged in in the Humanities Department. But for some creative assignments, it might be used consciously and specifically for a learning goal. So students should always be cautious and vigilant when considering whether or not to use an AI tool, considering whether a) the use of AI thwarts the goals of the assignment, and/or b) the use of AI is not permitted in your class or on this assignment. It is up to the student to know the

Assistive AI Tools are platforms that aid the user in producing or refining their own original content, but which do not generate new or creative content on their own (e.g., Hemingway, MS Editor, etc.). In general, Assistive AI platforms don't generate their own content, they aren't considered academic integrity violations. But for various reasons (e.g., students' need to develop their own mastery of grammar and syntax) individual instructors may prohibit their use. Using assistive technology when it is explicitly and clearly prohibited would be a violation of academic integrity.

For this class, you may use assistive AI tools but not generative AI tools. If I suspect you have used generative AI, I will first schedule a meeting with you to get more information and, if necessary, will assign an F for that assignment and report the issue to SJSU's Office of Student Conduct. The model that generative AI uses to generate material is fundamentally derivative and is also known to be inaccurate and incomplete and to reproduce misinformation, biases, and stereotypes. I want to hear your original ideas, arguments, and writing that can only be achieved by engaging with the texts we're reading and the writing process! Additionally, we want to make sure that the scholars and authors whose ideas we engage with are properly cited and credited to not only credit their labor/talents/insights but also to build our own credibility as an writer.

Ultimately, it is your responsibility to take ownership over your education and to practice the mental muscle of developing, refining, and communicating ideas through writing. It is also is your responsibility to know what plagiarism is, how to avoid it, and how to properly cite all sources. You should also familiarize yourself

with SJSU's [Academic Integrity Policy](https://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/conduct-processes/academic-integrity.php), (<https://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/conduct-processes/academic-integrity.php>) and know that, as a faculty member, I am required to report all violations of this policy to the Office of Student Conduct and Ethical Development.

Program Information

Welcome to this General Education course.

SJSU's General Education Program establishes a strong foundation of versatile skills, fosters curiosity about the world, promotes ethical judgment, and prepares students to engage and contribute responsibly and cooperatively in a multicultural, information-rich society. General education classes integrate areas of study and encourage progressively more complex and creative analysis, expression, and problem solving.

The General Education Program has three goals:

Goal 1: To develop students' core competencies for academic, personal, creative, and professional pursuits.

Goal 2: To enact the university's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and justice by ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to serve and contribute to the well-being of local and global communities and the environment.

Goal 3: To offer students integrated, multidisciplinary, and innovative study in which they pose challenging questions, address complex issues, and develop cooperative and creative responses.

More information about the General Education Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) can be found on the [GE website](https://sjsu.edu/general-education/ge-requirements/overview/learning-outcomes.php) (<https://sjsu.edu/general-education/ge-requirements/overview/learning-outcomes.php>).

Course Goals

Throughout this semester, we will practice and showcase the following learning goals:

1. describe some of the foundational goals and insights of comics studies;
2. use comics theory to develop a critical vocabulary for discussing how comics communicate ideas and create meaning;
3. trace the historical and creative development of comics as an artform in the U.S. across formats (editorial cartoons, newspaper strips, comic books, graphic novels/narratives, and webcomics);
4. discuss and analyze various forms and genres of comic art and use textual (both visual and verbal) evidence to support interpretation of texts; and
5. discuss how comics both creatively represent and critically comment on pressing social issues.

Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs)

GE Area 3B: Humanities

Across the disciplines in Area 3 coursework, students cultivate and refine their affective, cognitive, and expressive faculties by studying works of the human intellect and imagination. Area 3 courses help students to respond subjectively as well as objectively to aesthetic experiences and to develop an understanding of the integrity of both emotional and intellectual responses. In their intellectual and subjective considerations, students develop a better understanding of the interrelationship between the self and the creative arts and the humanities in a variety of cultures.

3B (Humanities) courses encourage students to analyze and appreciate works of philosophical, historical, literary, aesthetic, and cultural importance. Students may take courses in languages other than English in fulfillment of 3B if the courses do not focus solely on skills acquisition but also contain a substantial cultural component. This may include literature, among other content. Theater and film courses may be approved if they emphasize historical, literary, or cultural considerations. Logic courses may be accepted if the focus is not solely on technique but includes the role of logic in humanities disciplines.

GE Area 3B Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of a 3B course, students should be able to:

1. analyze and understand works of philosophical and humanistic importance, including their temporal and cultural dimensions;
2. explore and articulate their own subjective aesthetic and intellectual responses to such texts;
3. analyze and assess ideas of value, meaning, and knowledge, as produced within the humanistic disciplines; and
4. research and write effective analyses of works of the human intellect and imagination.

Writing requirement

3B classes require a minimum of 1500 words in a language and style appropriate to the discipline.

Course Materials

All of the required course texts are available to rent or purchase at the SJSU bookstore. While you do not have to purchase them there or at all, you do have to have access to them. **I encourage you to purchase print copies of the required texts if you are able.**

All other course readings will be available on Canvas.

Superman Smashes the Klan

Author: Gene Luen Yang
ISBN: 9781779504210

The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale

Author: Art Spiegelman
ISBN: 9780679406419

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic

Author: Alison Bechdel

ISBN: 9780618871711

Making Comics

Author: Lynda Barry

ISBN: 9781770463691

Optional

☰ Course Requirements and Assignments

Detailed assignment directions and grading rubrics will be available on Canvas and discussed in class in advance of due dates.

Daily Composition Diary (15%): We will open each class with a short free-write or drawing activity in your composition notebook. You will turn this notebook in at the end of class each week and receive credit for completion/participation.

Small Group Presentation (20%): The purpose of these presentations is to give you an opportunity to learn by becoming the teacher. You will take leadership over guiding your small group through your close reading/viewing and discussion of a meaningful moment from your assigned comic reading.

Midterm & Final Exam (40%): These exams will ask you to define and apply key concepts in comics studies to the comics we've read. They will consist of short answer and essay responses.

Final Project (25%): In the final project, you will have the option to showcase your learning in a format of your choice: creative or critical. You can choose to create either your own original short comic or a scholarly essay.

✓ Grading Information

Assignment Alignment with GEALOs

GEALO 1: Analyze and understand works of philosophical and humanistic importance, including their temporal and cultural dimensions.	All course readings, lectures, discussions, and assignments will support this outcome. All of the comics we will read have philosophical, humanistic, and aesthetic importance that we will discuss.
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GEALO 2: Explore and articulate their own subjective and intellectual responses to such texts	All course readings, lectures, discussions, and assignments will support this outcome. The small group presentation, the exams, and the final project will support this outcome.
GEALO 3: Analyze and assess ideas of value, meaning, and knowledge, as produced within the humanistic disciplines	Course readings, lectures, and discussions as well the small group presentation and the exams will support this outcome.
GEALO 4: Research and write effective analyses of works of human intellect and imagination.	The small group presentation, exams, and the final project will support this outcome.

Grading Breakdown

Daily Composition Diary 15%

Small Group Presentation 20%

Two Exams 40%

Final Project 25%

Extensions & Late Work

I am willing to work with you if you anticipate that you may need extra time to submit your best work in an assignment. In order to avoid last-minute stress, please email me in advance of an assignment deadline to discuss an extension. If an emergency or other extenuating circumstance arises that makes this impossible, please contact me, and we can work out a solution. If late work is submitted, it will be graded at my discretion and may receive a deduction.

University Policies

Per [University Policy S16-9 \(PDF\)](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf), relevant university policy concerning all courses, such as student responsibilities, academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. and available student services (e.g. learning assistance, counseling, and other resources) are listed on the [Syllabus Information](https://www.sjsu.edu/curriculum/courses/syllabus-info.php) web page. Make sure to visit this page to review and be aware of these university policies and resources.

Course Schedule

Note that I may adjust readings, assignments, and deadlines in the best interest of the class and our learning together. I will never add more work to this schedule, and all changes will be announced with advance notice.

When	Topic	Notes
Week 0	Course Introductions	<p>Thursday, Jan. 22</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions • Review of syllabus
Week 1	Introduction to Comics Studies	<p>Tuesday, Jan. 27</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrique Del Rey Cabero, Michael Goodrum, and Josean Morlesín Mellado's <i>How to Study Comics: A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies</i> <p>Thursday, Jan. 29</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scott McCloud's <i>Understanding Comics</i> Introduction and Chapter One
Week 2	Understanding Comics	<p>Tuesday, Feb. 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scott McCloud's <i>Understanding Comics</i> Chapter Two <p>Thursday, Feb. 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scott McCloud's <i>Understanding Comics</i> Chapter Three • Scott McCloud's "Understanding Comics Revisited: A Recap in 3 Pages" from <i>Reinventing Comics</i> • Kate Polak's "Three Ideas"
Week 3	Cartooning & Caricature	<p>Tuesday, Feb. 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael Mark Cohen's "Cartoon" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • In-class cartoon analysis <p>Thursday, Feb. 12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebecca Wanzo's "Caricature" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • In-class cartoon analysis
Week 4	Newspaper Strips	<p>Tuesday, Feb. 17</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from Paul Karasik & Mark Newgarden's <i>How to Read Nancy</i> • In-class reading & analysis of George Herriman's <i>Krazy Kat</i> strip and Bill Watterson's <i>Calvin and Hobbes</i> <p>Thursday, Feb. 19</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from Paul Karasik & Mark Newgarden's <i>How to Read Nancy</i> • In-class reading & analysis of Charles Schulz's <i>Peanuts</i> strip and Dale Messick's <i>Brenda Starr</i>

When	Topic	Notes
Week 5	Exam 1	<p>Tuesday, Feb. 24</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam study day <p>Thursday, Feb. 26</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam 1 (make-up exams must be scheduled in advance)
Week 6	Comic Books	<p>Tuesday, March 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jared Gardner's "Comic Book" from <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • <i>Action Comics</i> #1 (Superman's 1st appearance) <p>Thursday, March 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter One of Gene Luen Yang's <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> & Yang's essay "Superman & Clark Kent" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • (Read in class) Joshua Lapin Bertone's "The Evolution of Superman's Origin"
Week 7	Superhero Comics	<p>Tuesday, March 10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benjamin Saunders' "Superhero" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • Chapter Two of Gene Luen Yang & Gurihiru's <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i> <p>Thursday, March 12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ian Gordon's "Superman" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • Chapter Three of Gene Luen Yang & Gurihiru's <i>Superman Smashes the Klan</i>
Week 8	Contemporary Independent Comic Books	<p>Tuesday, March 17</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro's <i>Bitch Planet</i> #1 <p>Thursday, March 19</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro's <i>Bitch Planet</i> #3
Week 9	Underground Comics	<p>Tuesday, March 24</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amy Kiste Nyberg's "Censorship" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • Nicholas Sammond's "Comix" in <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • (In class) River H. Kero's "The History of the Underground Comix Movement" • In class explore <i>ZAP</i> and <i>It Ain't Me Babe</i> <p>Thursday, March 26</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art Spiegelman's <i>The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale</i> pp. 5-95

When	Topic	Notes
	Spring Break	<p>March 30 - April 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy some rest and relaxation! • Catch up on any reading or make-up work if necessary.
Week 10	Underground Comics	<p>Tuesday, April 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art Spiegelman's <i>The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale</i> pp. 97-166 <p>Thursday, April 9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art Spiegelman's <i>The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale</i> pp. 169-296 • Art Spiegelman and Joe Sacco "Never Again!"
Week 11	Queer Comics	<p>Tuesday, April 14</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alison Bechdel's "Coming Out Story" from Gay Comix #19 (https://archive.org/details/gay-co_real/Gay%20Comix%2019%20281st%20Edition%29%20%281993%29%20%28Sir%20Rea) (optional to read entire issue) • Alison Bechdel's "Pride and Prejudice" and "The Rule" from <i>Dykes to Watch Out For</i> • Chapter One of Alison Bechdel's <p>Thursday, April 16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 1-2 of Alison Bechdel's <i>Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic</i> pp.1-54
Week 12	The Graphic Novel	<p>Tuesday, April 21</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tahneer Oksman's "Graphic Novel" from <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • Ch. 3-4 of Alison Bechdel's <i>Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic</i> pp. 55-120 <p>Thursday, April 23</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ch. 5-7 of Alison Bechdel's <i>Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic</i> pp.121-232
Week 13	Webcomics	<p>Tuesday, April 28</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leah Misemer "Webcomics" from <i>Keywords for Comics Studies</i> • Explore various webcomics from <i>The Nib</i> <p>Thursday, April 30</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam review

When	Topic	Notes
Week 14	Exam 2 & Final Preparations	<p>Tuesday, May 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exam 2 (make-up exams must be scheduled in advance) <p>Thursday, May 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Final discussions & preparations
Finals Week		<p>Thursday, May 14, by 11:59 p.m.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Submit final project