

CMX304
HUMLS S26

MAKING COMICS!



SAN FRANCISCO
STATE UNIVERSITY

MW 2-3:15
HUM 474 (+ZOOM)

STUDENT HOURS

M 12³⁰-1³⁰; W 9⁴⁵-10⁴⁵ or by Appl
office HUM 581

NICK SOUSANIS@SFSU.EDU

THROUGH INDIVIDUAL AND COLLABORATIVE
COMICS-MAKING EXERCISES AND SMALL
PROJECTS (+ANALYSIS & CRITIQUE),
STUDENTS WILL EXPAND THEIR
UNDERSTANDING OF HOW TO COMMUNICATE
IN COMICS AND DISCOVER APPROACHES THAT
WORK BEST FOR THEM.

ASSESSMENT

30% ONGOING ACTIVITIES
30% BIO INFLUENCES;
MINI-COMIC; RECIPE BOOK
35% FINAL PROJECT
5% PORTFOLIO

RECIPE BOOK:
SHARE ADVICE
THAT HELPS YOU
MAKE COMICS

WE WILL PLAY & YOU WILL
GROW CONFIDENT IN HOW
TO SAY THINGS IN COMICS

THOUGH WE WILL DRAW ALL THE TIME - NO
PRIOR DRAWING EXPERIENCE REQUIRED!
INVENTIVENESS AND EFFORT KEY!

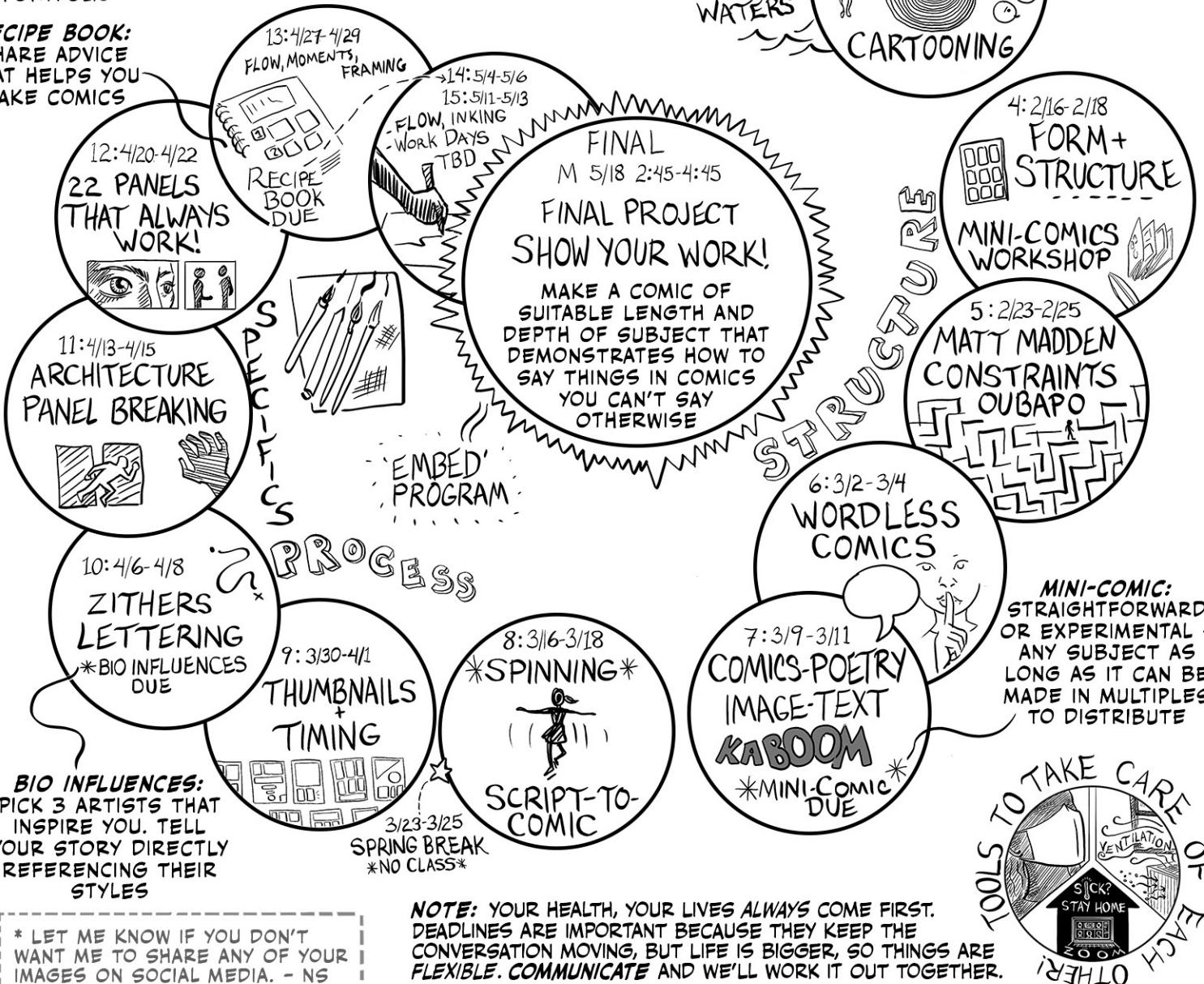
MATERIALS

- NOTEBOOK/SKETCHBOOK
- DRAWING TOOLS

** YOU WILL EXPAND YOUR
TOOLSET AS YOU DEVELOP
YOUR OWN APPROACH

READINGS

LYNDA BARRY SYLLABUS
MATT MADDEN 99 WAYS
TO TELL A STORY
TILLIE WALDEN SPINNING



San Francisco State University: Comics Studies
CMX/HUM/LS 304 Making Comics

Spring 2026

Class Meetings: MW 2-3:15 HUM 474 [+ ZOOM for illness/emergencies]

Instructor: Nick Sousanis sousanis@sfsu.edu Office HUM 581 [the Comics Lab]

Student Hours: M 12:30-1:30; W 9:45-10:45 or by appointment (in-person or Zoom)

A Note about Now: Let me acknowledge to start off, current circumstances aren't quite normal, and our expectations must reflect that. As understanding as I typically am about deadlines and workload, I'm even more so now. Your health, your lives *should always* come first and we can work out solutions for whatever is going on (with a good channel of communication). I want to see the work we do together as helpful to what you are experiencing and not an added burden. This doesn't mean we won't work hard and that it won't be challenging, just that it serves you as something meaningful and relevant to find your own ways into it. Deadlines are important, because they allow us to keep the conversation moving and keep learning from one another, but life is bigger, always, and definitely now, so I'll remain flexible and we'll work it out together.

The course will be in person, but to continue to take care of each other may mean masking in indoor spaces, and we'll do our best with ventilation/filtration. If you're sick – please stay home and take care of yourself. I will be streaming the class on zoom and recording it, so even if you can't make it, you can tune in live or watch when you can to access what we did, and all the instructions and resources will be available on Canvas. The key in all of this is to reach out and let me know what's going on and what you need. As a teacher, I see my role as being there *to support you in where you are going*. With that said, on with what we'll do together...

Overview: Introduction to the hands-on making of comics. Students will engage in numerous in-class exercises and small projects in making comics alongside analysis of comics, in order to grow their understanding of how to communicate in comics and discover methods that best work for them.

[Prerequisites: Upper division standing or consent of instructor]

Course Outline: Through instructor-led in-class and at-home individual and collaborative exercises, students will learn basic methods of constructing a page, developing a narrative across multiple pages, and a variety of formal issues that go into the creation of comics. The ultimate project for the course will be the creation of a short comic demonstrating your growth over the term. Students will also assemble (online) portfolios to showcase their finished projects, process, and to learn about growing an audience for their work.

To further our making skills, we will also analyze and absorb techniques and approaches gleaned from a wide variety of comics produced around the globe and throughout history, focusing on their unique or outstanding (and occasionally reproachable) formal qualities. Additionally, we will delve into comics theory and practice to explore how different creators/theorists articulate their working methods (including authors like Scott McCloud, Matt Madden & Jessica Abel, Lynda Barry, Ivan Brunetti, Will Eisner, Kevin Huizenga, and me).

Philosophy: *We will play and you will grow confident in how to say things in comics.*

Student Learning Outcomes

- identify significant formal features in the creation of comics and speak to their purpose and contribution to the storytelling;
- create comics utilizing a variety of different approaches, i.e. varying ratio of word to image, 9-panel pages versus splash pages, etc.;
- able to effectively communicate a narrative or idea through the comics form;
- have a command of a variety of techniques to produce comics;
- understand which ways of working best suit the student as author and how to use them most effectively to convey the sorts of narratives they want to tell;

- recognize the ways that they can employ the comics form to speak to real world situations – and have an awareness and sensitivity of the way in which working with visuals can provoke different effects than working solely in text;
- understand the steps that go into making a comic – from conception, to layouts, to producing a finished work;
- use the comics form as a means of self-discovery and expression.

Required Reading (*Comix Experience* offers discounts on readings and all comics for class members with a printout of the syllabus – visit them and other SF comics shops!):

Matt Madden *99 Ways to Tell a Story*

Lynda Barry *Syllabus*

Tillie Walden *Spinning*

Recommended Texts: Comics making is a highly individual and idiosyncratic activity. Therefore, we have no single “how to” text for the course. However, here are some texts that discuss elements of craft and theorize on the ways in which comics can convey things in ways other media can’t that we will draw on. I recommend acquiring at least one over the term that you find particularly insightful.

Scott McCloud *Understanding Comics & Making Comics*

Matt Madden & Jessica Abel *Writing Words & Drawing Pictures & Mastering Comics*

Ivan Brunetti *Cartooning*

Will Eisner *Comics & Sequential Art*

Nick Sousanis *Unflattening*

Old School Bonus! Stan Lee & John Buscema: *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*

Required Materials: Since we will regularly be drawing and making comics in this course, it goes without saying that you will need to have basic drawing materials. You will be responsible to build up your own tool set as you develop your particular approach to comics making, but I’ve listed the bare essentials here.

- A notebook/journal/sketchbook of some sort
- Drawing tool of your choice (pen, pencil, brush pen, etc.) (Color options are nice too)

Note: As it is impossible for any one of us to be aware of all the comics out there, we welcome bringing your recommendations for readings and artists to check out for all of us to learn from.

Assignments and Evaluation:

30% Ongoing mini-assignments (in-class and take home), participation

5% Portfolio collecting all the assignments and projects undertaken over the term

10% Mini-Comic

10% Biographical Influences Comic

10% Making Comics Recipe Book mini-chapter

35% Final project

Ongoing Min-Assignments/Participation (30%): This includes actively participating in discussion and engaging in the in-class and take-home ongoing comics-making activities or other drawing exercises, done independently and collaboratively. While we will draw all the time – **no prior drawing experience is required!** Your willingness and openness to explore, to dive in and try things with vigor and put yourself into the experience are key. From the mini-assignments to final projects, evaluation will be based primarily on completion, curiosity, effort, inventiveness, and ambition – not pre-existing skills.

Overview of potential in-class exercises in no particular order: Grids & Gestures; cutouts; collaboratively generated comics; How you got here in 3 panels & 2 pages; Madden’s *99 Ways*; symbolic comic – ala Nick’s Rabbit page; Airline safety manuals; wordless comic; 4 panel strip; Lynda Barry exercises; Sketchnotes; exquisite corpse, telephone and other constraint games. Others to be dreamed up by

participants and instructor along the way! *Also, some key themes we will explore over the term:* Comics Poetry, Architecture, Comics Journalism, Graphic Medicine, Memoir & Non-fiction Comics

Portfolio (5%): Gather and organize in a coherent fashion all the assignments and projects we've worked on over the term to showcase the richness of your explorations. You will also supply a brief reflection on what you learned through these experiences including thoughts on the creation of your final. Due on the last class.

Making Comics Recipe Book (10%): Imagine that as a group we are creating our own Making Comics Textbook, for which each class member contributes a short, single chapter highlighting some element of comics creation that you feel is particularly important, is unique to your own way of working, was helpful to you in learning to make comics – something that stands out and you'd like to explore a bit in depth in terms of organizing it in such a way to benefit others from your experience. This can include visual examples, process artifacts, the sorts of things you would want to see to learn for yourself. We'll discuss the form and specifics together over the term, but in addition to book-like formats, we can try other formats – doing it as a video, in comics form, and something online – that provides links to related resources.

Mini-Comic (10%): Make either a straightforward or experimental mini-comic on any subject as long as you can make it in multiples to distribute. We'll workshop formats, design, and look at a range of examples prior.

Biographical Influences Comic (10%): Make a short comic about yourself in some way where you directly reference the style from three different artists (comics or related) that you admire or were influenced by as a way to tell your own narrative. Instructor will provide more explanation and examples in class.

Final Project (30%): Make a comic of considerable length and depth of subject that shows what you've gained over the term, demonstrates a good understanding of making comics and how to say things with comics that you can't in another form. You will also provide a short reflection about your process, how the work evolved, what you learned along the way – that will be included as part of your portfolio. We will discuss over the term as you consider what to do, and then work on it and look at drafts together in class over the second half of the term. You can also consider the Comics Studies *Embed Program* – wherein a student cartoonist “embeds” in another department or unit on campus, and makes a comic in collaboration with them. I.E. spend time with biology faculty/students and make a comic about their work/the experience.

Course Outline Our schedule will likely evolve as we explore and generate responses to course material. In addition to key dates below, I will keep you all apprised in class, via email, and Canvas of what's coming. To ensure we remain on the same page, you are expected to check *Canvas* and your **sfsu email** account regularly.

1. **M/W 1/26-1/28** Intro, Grids & Gestures, ...
2. **M/W 2/2-2/4** Cutouts, Cartooning
3. **M/W 2/9-2/11** Lynda Barry & Cartooning
4. **M/W 2/16-2/18** Form & Structure; mini-comic workshop
5. **M/W 2/23-2/25** Matt Madden & Constraints;
6. **M/W 3/2-3/4** Wordless Comics;
7. **M/W 3/9-3/11** Comics Poetry, Word-Image relations; **Mini-comic due**
8. **M/W 3/16-3/18** Script-to-Comic; Discuss *Spinning*
** NO CLASS MW 3/23-3/25 *Spring Break*
9. **M/W 3/30-4/1** Thumbnails & timing;
10. **M/W 4/6-4/8** Zithers & Lettering; **Biographical Influences due**
11. **M/W 4/13-4/15** Architecture & Panel Breaking;
12. **M/W 4/20-4/22** 22 Panels That Always Work; *Final Proposal Due*
13. **M/W 4/27-4/29** Flow, Moments, Framing,...
14. **M/W 5/4-5/6** Flow/Moments Continued; **Recipe Book due**
15. **M/W 5/11-5/13** Work Days/Storyspine

Monday May 18 2:45-4:45 FINAL EXAM PERIOD – Project Sharing!

Note: I frequently share examples of what we do in class on my educational website/social media. Please let me know if you *do not* want me to share any of your images.

Canvas: We will be using Canvas for this class. Those of you unfamiliar with Canvas can find resources and assistance online as well as with the office of Academic Technology. You are automatically enrolled in Canvas for all of your courses registered at SFSU. *Academic Technology* website: <http://at.sfsu.edu>

Canvas log-in page: <https://canvas.sfsu.edu/canvas>

Course Policies

Classroom approach: I consider learning as acquiring the tools to follow one's own curiosity, and thus teaching means providing a framework, establishing an environment for participants to explore and thrive. Rather than being out in front, I see my role as accompanying students on a journey we all make together. As a class, we all come from different backgrounds and offer distinct vantage points – we want to draw on all of them – to expand the possibilities for what we can all learn as we each find our own way.

Classroom Policies: This is a class that thrives on interaction, improvisational collaboration, so it's best if everyone is in attendance and on time. That said, given the circumstances and in regards to my note at top – our expectations will be different. The main thing is to keep me posted on what's going on if you can't join in regularly – we can work with anything from a point of communication.

Late Assignments: Again, as above, I'd like to see deadlines observed or clear communication about missing them if necessary – conversations grow best when we're working together. But understanding, flexibility, and grace are essential now more than ever – so keep me updated as you can, and we can make it work.

Contact and Feedback: You are encouraged to visit me during student hours or make an appointment to discuss class, raise questions, or just check in. When emailing me, please use your "sfsu.edu" account when possible and put "CMX 304" and topic in the subject line so I am sure to address it more quickly.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a form of cheating or fraud; it occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism in LCA will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: I welcome the opportunity to support students with disabilities in my classroom. Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email dprc@sfsu.edu.

University Policy on Sexual Harassment & Violence: SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Dean of Students. To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; [SAFE Place website](http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/) http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/
Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208; [Counseling and Psychological Services Center website](http://pyservs.sfsu.edu) <http://pyservs.sfsu.edu>

For more information on your rights and available resources see: [Title IX at SF State](http://titleix.sfsu.edu) <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>