

Introduction to Semiotics: DSGN 3100-1

Course Code:	DSGN 3100-1
Course Name:	Introduction to Semiotics
Semester/ Year:	Winter 2020
Day/ Time/ Room:	Monday 9:00-12:00, Location N230
Instructor's Name:	Robert Currie
Instructor's Contact Information:	currie@nscad.ca or rcurrie@me.com
Office Location/Hours:	by appointment
Prerequisite(s)/Corequisite(s):	6 LASC credits at the 2000-level
Credit Value:	3 Credits

Course description

This course surveys various theories of signs especially with relation to problems of visual communication. Prerequisite: 6 credits LAS. This course is cross-listed with CSTU 3100.

Learning outcomes: Upon successful completion of this course the student will demonstrate the ability to:

- demonstrate an understanding of the main schools of thought in semiotics
- identify the types of signs, codes and rhetorical devices
- apply semiotic and rhetorical principles to practical and written work

By the end of the course, students should be familiar with the context of semiotics as it relates to philosophy, linguistics and contemporary critical theory, and be able to use semiotics as a core design problem-solving skill. *Please note that each learning outcome must be successfully achieved before a final grade for the course is assigned.*

Student workload: Total student workload for a 3 credit course is estimated to be 9 hours/week.

Course format: Weekly lectures, readings, class discussion, written and visual design assignments and in-class presentations.

Course requirements, resources, materials: *Design Papers 5 - Rhetorical Handbook*, by Ehses, Hanno and Ellen Lupton is a required text, and is available at the NSCAD bookstore.

Readings will be assigned weekly. Information will be provided via the class web site and class Slack:

Website: nscad.geneva9.com/dsgn3100/

Slack: <https://dsgn-3100-semiotics.slack.com>

Interdisciplinary approach:

Interdisciplinary design involves working across traditional boundaries of media and disciplines, and requires a set of intellectual tools that can address a broad set of problems.

Semiotic analysis is an approach that can be applied to any process that involves the communication of meaning. This course will use examples and assignments from a range of disciplines – advertising, product design, landscape architecture, interaction design and others – as starting points for students to develop a semiotic toolkit for design.

Planned Schedule:

- Class 1 Introduction to semiotics
- Class 2 Anatomy of signs
- Class 3 Models of Communication
- Class 4 Barthes: codes and myths
- Class 4 Rhetoric
- Class 5 Barthes: Semiotics of design
- Class 5 Models of Communication
- Class 6 Political semiotics
- Class 7 Rhetoric
- Class 8 Urban semiotics: signs and the city
- Class 9 Technical semiotics: Software, interfaces and communication
- Class 10 Greimas+McLuhan, bricolage and deconstruction
- Class 11 Case study: How to apply semiotic analysis to a design problem
- Class 12 Semiology of graphics
- Class 13 Exam and wrapup

Planned Assignments

These dates and descriptions may change; in all cases, complete assignment descriptions will be posted to the class web site. In case of any discrepancy, the class web site is the definitive version.

Assignment 1

Visually document signs.

Label each one, and classify each example as indexical, iconic, or symbolic. Make sure each sign is one you have found and documented yourself - you may use photographs, sketches or text where appropriate.

Ensure that you are choosing a wide variety of signs, and not limiting yourself to obvious examples such as icons, way-finding signs, etc. Some signs may be difficult to classify, or may be difficult to designate as signs, but be prepared to justify their inclusion.

Submit as a PDF file. For each sign, note the signified (and if not obvious by the image) the signifier, and its Peircean category (index, icon or symbol). If sign spans multiple categories, note them. Lay out the document with multiple signs per page. **Due Jan 20.**

Assignment 2

Take a walking survey of the environment - choose a street, or series of streets, and choose a category - cars, buildings, businesses or other element.

Record names of the items of the type you have chosen, and then organize them into (possible) categories based on the names - a bestiary, if you will. Make sure you organize based on the characteristics of the names, not the products themselves. Connotations values of names is what is most important here. Think about why the names are appropriate. What conventions are there about naming in this category? What qualities are the names trying to convey. In Barthian terms, what myths are these names supporting? **Due Jan 27.**

Assignment 3

Logos, Ethos, Pathos.

Locate three works of design - one for each of the three modes of rhetorical appeal. Create two alternate versions of each, using the other appeals. For example, if the work uses logos, create a version that uses ethos and pathos.

You do not need to redesign each work - you only need to submit an altered concept, using words to describe the new version. Submit as a PDF file. **Due Feb 3.**

Assignment 4

Dollar Store Semiotics

Make a visit to a Dollar Store. Choose a product that uses persuasion to suggest it is something it is not: healthy, genuine, effective, etc. Carefully analyse the systems of signs present in the item, using techniques similar to those in class on the knockoff brand chocolate bar. Treat the item as expressing a rhetoric: a systematic series of signs and messages, all performing different tasks.

Make reference to the various rhetorical strategies and appeals (ethos/pathos/logos), denotative and connotative language, types of codes and their audiences. Write a descriptive essay, outlining the semiotic aspects of the item. Use Barthes's "Rhetoric of the Image" as an inspiration, if you need. The Semiotics of Food and Drink may also be helpful.

Due Feb 10.

Assignment 5

This is not a place of fun

Your task is to create a playground that kids will not want to play in.

Background: Cities often require land developers to provide playgrounds as part of new housing developments. The land developer in this case must comply and build a playground, but doesn't want kids hanging around, because reasons. The playground you describe must follow the basic rules for playground safety and accessibility. You can review some of these rules here. You can't use obvious impediments such as fences, razor edges, land-mines, etc. Nor can you simply post signs that say, for example, "No playing allowed." **Due March 2.**

Assignment 6

Tropes and schemes

Review the Rhetorical Handbook. Choose a single type of physical product - furniture, architecture, etc.

Create four versions of it using different rhetorical schemes and tropes. Label each one, specifying the trope or scheme. You may use words or images (or both) to construct your versions. All of your versions must be of the same product - your task is to create different variations on it.

Due March 16.

Assignment 7

Metaphor and Interface

Choose an interface for a real software or hardware device. Re-design it using a strong metaphor (or metaphors.) Create a 1-page, landscape-format document depicting the interface. This is not a visual design exercise, but an exercise in communicating a concept.

Be prepared to explain your concept in class, using concepts covered in the "A Semiotic Model Of User-Interface Metaphor" reading. **Due March 30.**

Final Quiz

Written quiz on key concepts and readings.

April 20

NSCAD attendance policy

Class attendance at NSCAD is expected. Absences could result in lowered or failing grades. Absences may require the student to 'make up' the content missed before being allowed entrance to future classes (e.g. safety knowledge for shop, studio). Any absences must be addressed with the course instructor who may request supporting documentation. Please refer to 'Attendance Policy' found on Page 14 of NSCAD Academic Calendar and NSCAD webpage. Instructors may adapt a more specific attendance policy that could influence the final grade for this course.

NSCAD University occupational health and safety policy

At NSCAD safety is a priority. All students are required to obtain and maintain up-to-date safety (WHMIS) certification. An on-line Brightspace certification process is available to all NSCAD students.

Please note that your NSCAD ID card needs an up-to-date Health and Safety (WHMIS) sticker to access shops and studios, and for Security to permit you access to the university campus sites after hours. WHMIS training is provided online through students' Brightspace account.

Evaluation criteria:

Completion of all assignments is mandatory. Evaluation will be based on a number of assignments, quizzes, and an essay assignment. Participation in class discussion will also account for a portion of the grade. Assignments and projects will be completed outside of normal instruction hours. Dates and details will be provided as the course progresses. All work must be submitted in English. Each class will include class discussion of assigned readings from the text or other sources. Expect to spend significant time on the readings; many of the readings will be challenging. There may be brief in-class quizzes on readings.

Assignments:..... 70%

Class discussion and quizzes . . 15%

Final quiz..... 15%

Grading system: Successful completion of this course requires that students perform to an acceptable standard in reaching the course objectives. This course will be graded as follows:

Letter Grade	Numerical Equivalent	Grade Point Score	Descriptive Term
A+	95 and above	4.3	Excellent
A	90-94	4.0	Excellent
A-	85-89	3.7	Very Good
B+	80-84	3.3	Very Good
B	73-79	3.0	Good
B-	67-72	2.7	Good
C+	63-66	2.3	Satisfactory
C	59-62	2.0	Satisfactory
C-	55-58	1.7	Satisfactory
D	50-54	1.0	Marginal
F(Fail)	49 and below		unsatisfactory
AUD	n/a	n/a	Audit
INC	n/a	n/a	Incomplete

Academic integrity

A climate and culture of academic integrity is an expectation of everyone. Students at NSCAD are required to comply with standard academic practices in acknowledging sources in all work presented for academic credit. Please refer to the NSCAD Academic Calendar for the full description and regulations on 'Academic Integrity and Plagiarism'.

Writing Centre

The NSCAD Writing Centre in S403 offers professional tutoring for any kind of written assignment, at any level of study, at any stage of the work. Please see the Writing Centre web page for more information and booking online at <https://navigator.nscad.ca/wordpress/home/student-resources/the-writing-centre/>

Accessibility policy

Accommodations can be arranged for disability-related needs by consulting Bill Travis, Disability Resource Facilitator, in the Office of Student Experience (902-494-8313) within the first two weeks of class. Please refer to the NSCAD Academic Calendar for full details in 'Accommodations for Students Experiencing Disabilities', or visit the NSCAD Wellness Centre at: <https://wellness.nscad.ca>.

Spiritual/ Religious Observance:

Requests for accommodations for spiritual or religious observances must be presented in writing to the instructor within the first two weeks of class.