

4.053 FA 2025 Visual Communication Fundamentals

Course Details

Time

M 10AM–1PM

Th 2PM–5PM

Location

N52-337

Instructor

Bo-Won Keum (bkeum@mit.edu)

Office hours T 10AM–12PM at 5-418 — *please schedule appt in advance*

Teaching Assistant

Simmone Stearn (simm2957@mit.edu)

Website

<https://fundamentals.bo-won.com/>

Zoom

<https://mit.zoom.us/my/fundamentals>

Course Description

This studio course provides an introduction to visual communication through its most essential elements: type and image. Together we'll explore how letters and images work, both on their own and in combination, to create meaning. Along the way, students will learn and experiment with fundamental graphic strategies such as juxtaposition, repetition, scale, cropping, etc, for building visual narratives that are clear, compelling, and inventive. Each unit begins and ends with an anchor project, supported by hands-on exercises, readings, screenings, and lectures. The course offers a foundation for developing your own voice and approach within communication design.

Course Structure

Unit 1: Type as Form

We study type anatomy, type classification, and the construction of the alphabet. Students learn to use typographic terms, evaluate typographic form, and train their eye to see and scavenge for useful forms in the world.

Project: Found Alphabet Poster

9/4–9/25 (4 weeks)

Final on Thursday 9/25

Unit 2: Type and Image

We explore the basics of visual storytelling through exercises in image curation, sequencing, and image–text combinations.

Project: Visual Narrative Booklet

9/29–10/30 (5 weeks)

Final on Thursday 10/30

Unit 3: Type and Image in Systems

We grapple with system-based form-making by developing visual identities and concepts that must span multiple iterations. Students also practice typesetting and working with grids.

Project: Poster Series

11/3–12/08 (6 weeks)

Final on Monday 12/08

Schedule as Timeline

1	Unit 1 Type as Form	Sept			04	Assignment 1: Alphabet Atlas begins
2			08	- Share 3 source options - Discussion + Exercise: Form and Counterform	11	- Source finalized - Discussion + Exercise: Different Strokes for Different Folks
3			15	Class field trip* to see MIT Museum: Future Type <i>*meet at the museum entrance at 10AM</i>	18	- Midpoint check-in: 50% letters finished - Begin poster design
4			22	Full poster draft due	25	Assignment 1: Alphabet Atlas due Homework Project 2 pre-assignment
5	Unit 2 Type and Image	Oct	29	Assignment 2: Mechanical Eye begins Project 2 pre-assignment review and discussion	02	Share source options and studies, finalize source in class.
6			06	- Share progress on image collection - Exercise: Sequence - Begin storyboard	09	- Share draft sequence and storyboard with text - Discussion + Exercise: Grids and Composition (Books)
7			13	NO CLASS	16	First printed draft with text due
8			20	- Discussion: Not Image, Not Type - Printing and binding demo	23	Second printed and bound draft with text due
9			27	NO CLASS	30	Assignment 2: Mechanical Eye due Homework Project 3 pre-assignment
10	Unit 3	Nov	03	Assignment 3: Poster Series begins	06	- Present moodboards and references - Discussion: On Typefaces and Character

	Type and Image in Systems			- Project 3 pre-assignment review and discussion - Exercise: Grids and Compositions (Posters)		- Screening + Reading
11			10	NO CLASS	13	- Present concept proposals - Printing and tiling demo
12			17	Poster #1 draft due	20	Guest Speaker: Omnivore
13			24	Poster #2 draft due	27	NO CLASS
14		Dec	01	Full poster series (Poster #1, #2, #3) draft due	04	Fine typesetting, printing troubleshooting, and planning final review
15			08	Assignment 3: Poster Series due		

Required Materials

Adobe Illustrator

Adobe Photoshop

Adobe InDesign

[Figma account](#)

A laptop

A smartphone that can take pictures

X-acto blade (provided)

Cutting mat (provided)

Straight-edge ruler (provided)

Course Tools/Resources

Printing (letter and tabloid)

There is a copy printer on the third floor of N52—a short walk from our classroom—that can print both B&W and color on Letter (8.5 x 11”) and Tabloid (11 x 17”). This printer can also scan and photocopy.

As this is the only larger-format printer available to us in the building, please try to plan using it as much in advance as possible. Please see the note on craft.

Printing (large-format posters)

For final projects, students will use the plotters in the Building 7 architecture studios.

Binding

The copy room at N52 is supplied with a Spiral Coil Binding Machine and a Heavy Duty Saddle-Stitch Stapler. A limited supply of coils is also available. For more colors, etc, please talk to Bo or the TA.

Paper

A limited supply and selection of heavier-weight and different colored paper is also in the copy room at N52. (This will only be relevant for Assignment 2.)

Other MIT Resources

The MIT Library is an excellent resource for design material. [Rotch Library](#) has many of the design periodicals and textbooks that this class references. [Hayden Library](#) also has issues of Visible Language, the world's oldest peer-reviewed design journal.

In addition to its archive of extremely rare historical materials, [MIT Distinctive Collections](#) also holds a sizable collection of artist books and zines. Distinctive Collections also hosts “Books and Bites”, an event every semester that displays a curated selection of artist books for browsing and handling. (Snacks and refreshments are provided!)

[The MIT List Center](#) also holds an extremely impressive collection of contemporary artwork by many artists, designers, and visual thinkers cited frequently in class.

[The MIT Writing and Communication Center](#) is also available to any MIT class. Appointments are accessible online via mit.mywconline.com or on site at E18-233, 50 Ames Street.

Course Policies and Etiquette

In a studio class, you get what you put in—so show up right, both for yourselves and for each other. Please read the following points carefully, as together they lay the foundations for a productive and rewarding learning environment.

Schedule

Attendance starts 5 minutes after the hour and ends 10 minutes after the hour. During this time, you must pin-up, display, or tidy your work for review—we start immediately at 10 after the hour, anything afterwards is late. On the final review, December 8, we may have to start exactly on the hour—this will be determined later based on the finalized class size.

Critique

Critiques are our way of helping you improve your work and are only successful if you are willing to participate. Studio is as much a brave space as it is a safe space. It is not only brave to share work; it is also brave to share feedback i.e. critique, which is sharing *what* and *how* you see. Thusly, sharing feedback is *equally* as important as sharing work—both offer different ways of sharing and expressing your worldview to your peers. Design is a conversation, not a monologue—and the conversation is only as strong as the diversity of perspectives it holds.

Craft

Do not save things for the last minute. Production takes time, especially at MIT; remember that you must also print things with time to trim. Class cannot and *will not* start if we have folks printing, trimming, or binding in class, as it is extremely distracting.

Attendance

This is a studio class—attendance is mandatory for all sessions. Tardiness will be marked and will negatively impact your grade; extreme tardiness will count as an absence. Every unexcused absence counts as a full letter grade deduction. Greater than three absences from the studio without a medical excuse supported by a doctor's note or verifiable personal emergency will result in a failing grade.

If there are any medical issues, personal emergencies, and special circumstances that impede the fulfillment of your academic obligations, please be proactive and discuss them with me as far in advance as possible.

Late Submissions

Late submissions without a verifiable excuse will not be accepted.

Grading

The following evaluation criteria should serve as rubrics for assignments, exercises, and in-class engagement. Assignments are evaluated on an A-F scale; exercises and in-class engagements are evaluated on a check plus/minus scale. Note that "in-class engagement" refers to all in-class activity outside of exercises—such as discussions; critique; and responses to lectures, trips, and guests.

Assignment Evaluation Criteria

- A** Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the material, a skillful use of tools, and a high-level of iteration and risk-taking. Work demonstrates a high level of production and craft, is surprising, and goes above and beyond the outlined requirements
- B** Good performance demonstrating a solid understanding of the material and competent use of tools. Shows some experimentation but limited risk-taking. Level of production and craft is acceptable but could use some refinement.
- C** Meets the bare minimum requirements but shows no evidence of iteration or risk-taking. Demonstrates a limited understanding of the material and tools. Work lacks polish and refinement.
- D** Work is submitted but does not fulfill all requirements. Demonstrates a poor understanding of the material and tools, and an unacceptable level of craft.
- F** Failed to submit work.

Exercise Evaluation Criteria

- ✓+ Exceptional participation and submission of work.
- ✓ Full participation and submission of work.
- ✓- Incomplete participation and submission of work.
- F Failed to submit work.

In-class Engagement Criteria

- ✓+ Exceptional participation and presence. Actively contributes to discussions by offering ideas, asking questions, and engaging peers. Consistently demonstrates curiosity in the course material and has a positive impact on the classroom.
- ✓ Good participation and presence. Contributes to discussions when prompted. Demonstrates steady interest in the course material that helps support the classroom dynamic.
- ✓- Limited or inconsistent participation and presence, with little to no effort made to contribute to discussions in any form. Shows limited interest in the course material.

Final Grade Breakdown

15%	Exercises
20%	Assignment 1
25%	Assignment 2
30%	Assignment 3
10%	In-class engagement

Midterms

Midterm feedback will be provided after the Unit 2 final.

Academic Integrity

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently:

<http://integrity.mit.edu/>

AI Policy and Guidance

I will ask that any use of AI be openly shared and discussed; it is here to stay, and I think it's exciting to be able to talk about how we live with it and integrate it productively into our design processes. Despite my personal anxieties about its long-term effects on culture writ large, I think AI is a powerful design tool for iterating and ideating, and don't mind it being tapped for such purposes. Its use for generating an *entire* visual project from start to finish is still quite limited; I would be shocked if anyone were able to pull that off in this class, especially with the level of precision required for type. (Maybe you can prove me wrong—but also do remember that you are taking this course to learn the basics and to understand how things work. AI can work beautifully when asked to build on a foundation; not so much when asked to replace it entirely.)

More on this as we continue...