

4.053 FA 2026 Visual Communication Fundamentals

Course Details

Time

M 10AM–1PM

Th 2PM–5PM

Location

W41-3509

Instructor

Bo-Won Keum (bkeum@mit.edu)

Office hours T 10AM–12PM at W41-3519 or on Zoom — *please schedule appt in advance*

Teaching Assistant

Max Cheever (max0@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. Students will explore how letters and images work, both on their own and in combination, to create meaning. 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. The course offers a foundation for developing voice and method within communication design.

Course Structure

Generally, the course will operate on the following structure:

Monday: Image Bank, Introductory lecture/presentation, Exercise x.1, Group crits

Thursday: Exercise x.2, Lab, Lecture, Individual crit

The first seven weeks (**Week 1–7**) of the course will cover fundamentals. Each week will consist of two formal exercises designed to train your eye.

Within the fundamentals unit, students will also complete a regular exercise called [Image Bank](#), which requires one image submission in response to a prompt at the beginning of every week. Each week will begin with this review. There will be 6 total by the end of the unit.

The second unit of the course will be a three-part project called **Tools for Drawing Letters**. Students will produce three kinds of alphabets—found, object, and drawn. The found alphabet will be produced as a printed booklet and the object alphabet will be produced as a printed poster. The drawn alphabet will be presented in both presentation form and as a printed type specimen; these will also be converted to digital font files that will be compiled in the form of a class newspaper.

All three parts of the project will be shown for the final presentation, to be determined in the MET.

Communication

All course updates will be posted on our website: <https://fundamentals.bo-won.com/>. This is also where links to exercise and project briefs, readings, and technical instruction docs will be posted. The instructor will also provide weekly emails on deliverables for the following week.

Readings

Concept readings will accompany lectures and inform the exercises and projects. These will be provided by the instructor and announced at the beginning of each week.

Required Materials

Laptop

Adobe Illustrator

Adobe Photoshop

Adobe InDesign

A smartphone that can take pictures*

X-acto blade (provided)

Cutting mat (provided)

Straight-edge ruler (provided)

*Please inform us ASAP if you do not have this.

Course Tools/Resources

Printing

 Printing at the MET

Binding

Our classroom space has a dedicated binding and prep station that includes a Spiral Coil Binding Machine and a Heavy Duty Saddle-Stitch Stapler. A limited supply of coils is also available; more colors can be requested in advance.

Paper

A limited supply and selection of heavier-weight and different colored paper will be made available closer to the midterms.

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.

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.

Schedule

Attendance starts 5 minutes after the hour and ends 10 minutes after the hour. During this time, please pin-up, display, or tidy your work for review—we start immediately at 10 after the hour, anything afterwards is late.

On final project review days, we start exactly on the hour in order to ensure we end on time. Attendance for final project review days are part of the final project grade—if you are late for final review, your project grade is docked a full letter grade. If you are absent for final review without prior notice, you will receive a failing grade.

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.

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.

Project 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.

Image Bank 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

35% Exercises

- 35% Project
- 15% Image Bank
- 15% In-class engagement

Midterms

Midterm feedback will be provided after the exercise unit.

Studio Culture and Academic Integrity

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently:
<http://integrity.mit.edu/>

Studio Culture and Critique

Critiques are our way of helping you improve your work. Critiques are only successful if everyone is willing to participate.

Sharing feedback is equally as important as sharing work: both offer different ways of expressing your worldview to your peers. 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, which is a way of sharing what and how you see in someone else's work. This is crucial in feeding

In critique, aim to be specific, generous, and honest: describe what you see before offering opinions, and frame feedback around the work's own goals. Critique should always come ordered in the following structure: describe, analyze, interpret, and judge.

AI Policy and Guidance

I will ask that any use of AI—for research, ideation, image generation, writing, or coding—be openly shared and discussed. This means noting where and how you used AI tools when you present or submit work, and being ready to talk through your process in critique.

AI tools can be useful for research and ideation, but the visual thinking, decision-making, and craft in your work should be your own. Passing off AI-generated material as your own creative work, without disclosure, will be treated as a violation of academic integrity.

Student Support Services

If you are dealing with a personal or medical issue that is impacting your ability to attend class or complete work, students should contact a dean in Student Support Services (S3). The deans will verify your situation, provide you with support, and help you work with your professor to determine next steps. In most circumstances, students will not be excused from coursework without verification from a dean. Please visit the S3 website for contact information and more ways that they can provide support.