Dear digital media composers,

I’m going to start with that crucial question, of grades. There are no graded quizzes in this course, and no tests. Here’s the deal: if you participate actively, and meet some baseline unit criteria that we come up with together, your minimum grade – the minimum, not a guarantee, but a floor – is a B. I’ve got a four-page packet / Canvas module explaining what that means, and how you can go up or down from there, but that’ll be part of the reading for homework.

Feeling a little better? Or still curious about the course’s actual content? (I hope it’s both.)

I’ve arranged the units of the course to build on each other, adding a new layer or wrinkle while carrying forward something of what we’d done previously. In the first unit, we’ll think about the *affordances of digital media*: that is, what’s made possible by working with bits instead of paper, even when we are still working with words? How do the answers change, or shift, as we move beyond words into aural and visual modes? The vocabulary we build here, at the start of class, will carry through the semester as a set of lenses, shaping what we pay attention to. In this first unit, rather than build a particular object, we’ll get used to using *version control software* with our writing – which is to say, we’ll keep track of what’s changing from microdraft to microdraft. The tools we’ll use here are Git and GitHub, which were developed for computer programming, but are adaptable to any kind of digital composing. In fact, GitHub is how we’ll be hosting nearly all the materials for this course, including our discussion forum and your projects-in-progress. (The occasional file I need to keep private, I’ll post to Canvas.)

The second unit is focused on *soundwriting*; it adds a layer of simultaneity by allowing several audio tracks to play at once (as opposed to the single linearity of prose text). We’ll take a little tour of our sonic neighborhoods to practice paying attention to sounds, and the stories those sounds tell, sometimes below the level of conscious awareness. The major project for this unit is an *audio narrative* of your own design, whether documentary, fictional, or even science-fictional: I’ll ask you to record and rearrange the sounds that surround you, using Audacity as our tool of choice.

Unit three moves into *visual rhetorics*, adding multiple layers of depth to our x-y grid, even as we lose the axis of time. (Apologies to anyone who was especially excited to work on video, but I had to sacrifice something in designing this course: 14 weeks is really not a lot of time!) The major project in this unit is *visual argument*: a kind of collage, but – importantly - a collage that aims to make an intervention in the world through its juxtaposition of images and text. Though some of you may have some experience with Photoshop, I’m going to focus on GIMP: it’s nearly as powerful, and because it’s free, you’ll be able to keep using it easily after graduation. (Regardless of software, it’s important to realize that the biggest differences are in surface trappings – which are a lot less important than the functions they invoke, and the design principles that help you decide what you’re trying to do. If you feel strongly that Photoshop is more appropriate for your learning and career goals, talk to me about it in office hours, and maybe we can work something out.)

The fourth unit, and with it the third major project, take us deeper into the computer’s stack: we’ll be working with HTML and CSS to build beautiful *responsive websites* more or less from scratch. If you’ve never worked with *markup languages* before, don’t worry; I know an amazing tutorial. As for tools, there are many excellent markup-sensitive text editors out there, but if you don’t have a preference, I recommend the cross-platform Atom. (Just don’t use a word processor like MS Word or even LibreOffice, which would add a lot of junk code behind the scenes.) We’ll publish the websites using GitHub’s built-in Pages functionality.

Unit five asks you to put it all together, revisiting earlier projects and/or skillsets to consolidate what you’ve learned and project forward beyond the semester. We’ll talk more about how that will work as it gets closer.

Maybe you noticed that I’m not planning to teach you any “industry standard” software. This is a design choice I made, deliberately, if not without some hesitation. Here’s why: even if I could teach you every aspect of a single program, there are many more out there, all of them changing with each new release, each new competitor. Ultimately, there’s no way to learn all there is to know about Composing Digital Media in one semester, or maybe a lifetime. Instead, what I hope the course can teach you, what I hope you’ll learn, are strategies for dealing with that endless churn – a sense of what to look for, and where to look, to figure out the next new tool, and the next, and the next.

So I’ll frequently ask you to pause, to notice where your attention is drawn, and to consider what possibilities are present or suggested. I’ll ask you to read and respond to both model texts and arguments; to reflect in writing frequently on the choices you’re making, and why. And, above all, I’ll ask you to keep making choices, and making new things. As composition scholar Doug Hesse put it, you can’t learn to play piano just by reading about the piano; why should we expect any differently about writing, in any form?

I don’t expect us all to become concert-solo ready in fourteen short weeks. But I’m looking forward to rehearsals, just the same.

All best,

Benjamin Miller (please call me Ben)