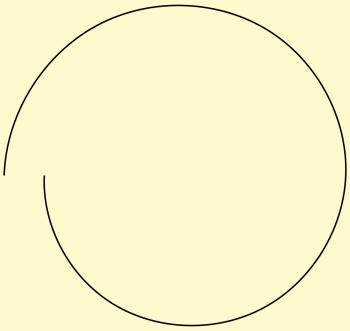
Visual Principles for the Screen

Term		Fall 2025	
University		Washington University in St. Louis	
School		Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts	
Course	Symbol		
	Title	Visual Principles for the Screen	
	Faculty	Laurel Schwulst, laurels@wustl.edu	
	Location	Steinberg Hall, Room 6 (in-person)	
	Days	Mondays & Wednesdays	
	Credits	3	
	Number	DESIGN1265-02	DESIGN1265-03
	Time	1–3:50pm	8:30am–11:20pm
	AI	April Jung, junga@wustl.edu	Ashley Xiang, axiang@wustl.edu
	Description	*The demand for graphic literacy in contemporary culture is only increasing, redefining our need to understand how design functions and why. How can products and communication be crafted with the user in mind? How can design facilitate seamless, intuitive digital experiences? This studio course will address considerations for web, mobile, and other screen-based applications, including hierarchy, typography, iconography, layout, color, and image. This course is ideal for students seeking to learn fundamental graphic design and messaging principles and who want to produce robust, researched website and mobile application prototypes. Studio work will be supplemented by supporting lectures and readings. Lab optional.*	
	Pre- & co-requisities	*For the course listed under the title "Visual Principles for Design" — Undergraduate students only. And for the course listed under the title "Design Principles for Interaction I" — Students should have a program of study (Illustration and Visual Culture) OR a program of study (Master of Design in HCi + Emerging Technology).*	
	Website	2025-fall-washu.veryinteractive.net/principles-for-screen	

Learning Objectives

Through researching, designing, and prototyping screen-based experiences — inhabiting the role of visual or user experience designer — we will:

- **Learn fundamental graphic design skills.** These include typography, color, iconography, hierarchy, grid, scale, balance, pacing, editing, curation, and language.
- **Explore methods of creating coherent, strong, yet flexible design systems**. Zooming out, graphic design at its core is a method for creating coherent systems — whether it be for a book, website, brand guide, or wayfinding program. All these systems have an internal logic that brings disparate pieces together, guiding the user.
- **Produce thoughtful prototypes**. In other words, we will practice presenting ideas as edited and coherent designed, tangible deliverables.
- **Develop a practice of caring for details on both the macro and micro levels**. Good designers regularly care for details on multiple levels of zoom. At the macro level, we will convey a broadly consistent and clear systematic design. And on the micro level, we will make design decisions that consider the individual user's experience and key design details that ensure usability in today's world.

Course Structure and Assignments

This is a studio course grounded in creating design projects that are supported by exploration and research — both formal and conceptual.

Individual classes will include a combination of:

- **sharing**
  (lecture, show and tell of examples)
- **seminar**
  (discussion on readings)
- **working**
  (learning, experimenting, designing, coding, troubleshooting, demos)
- **critiquing**
  (spending time with others' work, offering observations, discussion)

The entire course consists of:

- **Three longer projects**
- **Weekly assigned readings and responses**
- **Group publication**

Projects

- Project 1. Visual Texts
  (images)
- Project 2. Home Sweet Home
  (websites)
- Project 3. *To be announced*
  (app / kiosk / system)

More information regarding these projects will be shared as the semester continues.

Weekly readings and responses

For most of the semester, readings will be assigned with a corresponding writing prompt. Writing prompts are due each week on Are.na.

Group publication

We will collect and publish some of our experiments (sourcing from Projects 1, 2, 3, and weekly writing responses) into a publication — specific medium (print, website, etc.) to be determined. To do this, we will split into small teams with specific roles (design, editorial, project management, etc).

Course Requirements and Grading

For this course, the grading breakdown is:

60% … Projects
- 20% … Project 1
- 20% … Project 2
- 20% … Project 3

15% … Weekly responses to assigned readings

15% … Group publication participation

10% … Overall participation, diligence, attitude

Students will receive a rubric, written feedback, and a grade for each project in this course. Late project submissions will receive a one time lateness penalty of a third of a letter grade. Late reading responses will receive half credit.

Grades are determined based on this scale:

A … 90-100
B … 80-89
C … 70-79
D … 60-69
F … 59-Below

Projects are evaluated on:
- Evolution over time
- Quality

Evolution over time — The projects in this course are cumulative and build on themselves each week, so it is very important to maintain steady investment on a weekly basis to progress. Students come to class each week with some attempt and good effort at advancing and evolving their projects.

Quality — Projects should both take a stance (be poetic, memorable, critical, and clear) and also be functional (achieve their goals and not break). Taking risks is not only encouraged but essential to worthwhile exploration and ongoing development. Thoughtfulness and craft (in design, code, and presentation) is also important.

Weekly reading responses are evaluated on their on-time completion and thoughtfulness.

Group publication participation is evaluated based on each student's willingness and contributions to the group publication — individually and collectively. It doesn't have to be substantial, but a general attitude of helpfulness and teamwork is essential.

Overall participation is evaluated on consistent and invested progress on all coursework; meeting scheduled project milestones; contributing actively and generously to class discussions and peer review; and demonstrating a problem-solving attitude by seeking out feedback, answers, and solutions.

Required Texts, Materials, and Supplies

While this course is tool agnostic (that is, students should use whatever tool best suits the task at hand), we will explore using the most popular tools of the day in the field of user interface design.

- **For ideating and wireframing** —
  We will start with paper and pencil/pen or whiteboard.

- **For digital image-making, sketching** —
  Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign are standard tools available on most WashU computers. Figma is another great online software. Other good digital-image making tools include a phone, digital camera, scanner, screen capture, etc.

- **For creating digital prototypes** —
  We will use the free online tool Figma for designing, prototyping, presenting, and sharing digital work. We will also learn the basics of front-end web development with languages HTML and CSS, so students should download a code editor such as VSCode, Atom, or Sublime Text to edit code.

- **For researching and sharing process** —
  All students will create an Are.na account if they don't already have one for posting incremental updates and doing research. We will also use Are.na for submitting written weekly reading responses and eventually co-organizing the group publication.

Texts

Note there is no required textbook for this course. Individual readings will be assigned on a weekly basis, available on the course website and over email.

Please read actively, marking passages, writing down quotes and reflections, and recording questions as they arise. In class, we'll be discussing the ideas and concepts that resonate with us. All commentary is welcome; the hope is that being in dialogue with each other will help everyone understand the readings better, deeper, and/or differently.

Class Website

Bookmark our class website: http://2025-fall-washu.veryinteractive.net/principles-for-screen. This website is the main class "hub." All updates and resources will be here. Note this class will not use Canvas but instead the class website.

Course Schedule

This is a preliminary schedule and is subject to change. Visit the class website for the most up-to-date version.

	(Seminar Focus on Mondays)	(Lab Focus on Wednesdays)
Week 1 <P1>	**Monday, August 25** Welcome Lecture: A flower is not a flower… Warm-Up	**Wednesday, August 27** Project 1: Introduction
Week 2 <P2>	**Monday, September 1** Project 2: Introduction Lecture: Layers on layers… Project 1: Check In	**Wednesday, September 3** Project 2A: Hello World!
Week 3	**Monday, September 8** Lecture: Slicing the strawberry…	**Wednesday, September 10** Project 2B: HTML & CSS
Week 4	**Monday, September 15** Lecture: How interfaces learn...	**Wednesday, September 17** Project 2C: Collection of Things
Week 5	**Monday, September 22** Lecture: Letter and spirit… Project 1: Check In	**Wednesday, September 24** Project 2D: Bio on Table
Week 6	**Monday, September 29** Lecture: Color codes...	**Wednesday, October 1** Project 2E: Home Sweet Home
Week 7	**(No Class: Fall Break)**	**Wednesday, October 8** Project 2F: Mode Making Project 1: Check In

Week 8 </P2> <P3>	**Monday, October 13** Project 2: Final Critique	**Wednesday, October 15** Lecture: Family interfaces... Project 3: Introduction
Week 9	**Monday, October 20** Lecture: The periphery....	**Wednesday, October 22** Project 3A: Research
Week 10 <Publication>	**Monday, October 27** Lecture: Publish or perish… Project 1: Check In	**Wednesday, October 29** Project 3B: First Sketches
Week 11	**Monday, November 3** Lecture: Pattern recognition...	**Wednesday, November 5** Project 1: Collection
Week 12	**Monday, November 10** Lecture: Change over time...	**Wednesday, November 12** Project 3B: Second Sketches
Week 13	**Monday, November 17** Project 3C: Prototype Review	**Wednesday, November 19** Publication Working Session
Week 14 </P3>	**Monday, November 24** Project 3 Final Critique	**(No Class: Thanksgiving Break)**
Week 15 </P1> </Publication>	**Monday, December 1** Publication Working Session Project 1: Final Share	**Wednesday, December 3** Publication Working Session Celebration!

If for whatever reason the instructor of this course, Laurel Schwulst, cannot be physically present — for a planned or unplanned reason — this will be communicated with students at the earliest possible moment. Absence of Prof. Schwulst will be made up either by inviting a guest instructor to meet with students during class time, pre-recording a lecture for students to watch asynchronously coupled with a short assignment, or scheduling a learning activity outside of scheduled class times.

Course Policies and Important Resources

Academic Integrity	*In all academic work, the ideas and contributions of others (including generative artificial intelligence) must be appropriately acknowledged and work that is presented as original must be, in fact, original. You should familiarize yourself with the appropriate academic integrity policies of your academic program(s).* In general, trust the value of your own intellect and skills. Undertake research and design projects honestly and credit others for their work. In this technology-based course in particular, students will become familiar with using pre-existing language, images, and software as raw material while creating entirely new works. While making designs for screens, we will learn which sources could be used as components or otherwise incorporated, and how to properly credit their inclusion. From Academic Integrity at MIT: "Writing Code": “Writing code is similar to academic writing in that when you use or adapt code developed by someone else as part of your project, you must cite your source. However, instead of quoting or paraphrasing a source, you include an inline comment in the code. These comments not only ensure you are giving proper credit, but help with code understanding and debugging. You should not simply re-use code as the solution to an assignment. Like academic writing, your code can incorporate the ideas of others but should reflect your original approach to the problem.” In this design course, it’s natural to be inspired by others, whether they are figures outside of class or other students. Whether collaborating intentionally or being inspired by or adapting work by others, remember to credit. Crediting others for their contribution to your work promotes ethical practice. For a holistic approach to honoring lineages and crediting in space and time, see “Multidimensional Citation.” When using AI, please use discretion. Note that being in college is a special yet limited time in which you are surrounded by world-class experts in their fields, so we recommend you utilize this helpful atmosphere to the best of your ability while you’re here, rather than outsourcing to AI for feedback on coursework. While this course will not utilize TurnItIn (a free plagiarism checker) functionality, plagiarism is prohibited.
Technology	While this course is about technology, the policy in this course is simple: Be considerate of your fellow classmates. For example, if someone is presenting their work, don’t simultaneously use your multi-purpose device. Put your smartphones and laptops away in order to provide the presenter your active attention.
Attendance	Attendance is essential. Four or more absences will result in a failing grade. Four or more late arrivals (more than 10 minutes late) equals an absence. Regarding any health-related concerns, family commitments, and/or religious holidays, exceptions to this policy can be made with clear communication and commitment to make up any missed work. If you must miss class, email Prof. Schwulst with as much advance notice as possible.

Unauthorized Recording and Distribution of Classroom Activities and Materials	*Except as otherwise expressly authorized by the instructor or the university, students may not record, stream, reproduce, display, publish or further distribute any classroom activities or course materials. This includes lectures, class discussions, advising meetings, office hours, assessments, problems, answers, presentations, slides, screenshots or other materials presented as part of the course. If a student with a disability wishes to request the use of assistive technology as a reasonable accommodation, the student must first contact the Office of Disability Resources to seek approval. If recording is permitted, unauthorized use or distribution of recordings is also prohibited.*
Disability Resources	*WashU supports the right of all enrolled students to an equitable educational opportunity and strives to create an inclusive learning environment. In the event a physical or online environment, learning activity, or learning interaction results in barriers to your inclusion due to a disability, please contact WashU's Disability Resources (DR) to engage in a process for determining and communicating approved accommodations. As soon as possible after receiving an accommodation from DR, send me your WashU Accommodation Letter. Because accommodations are not applied retroactively, initiate your request to DR prior to, or at the beginning of, the academic term to avoid delays in accessing accommodations once classes begin. Students should sign up for proctored exams with DR.*
Sexual Harassment and Assault	*If you are a victim of sexual discrimination, harassment or violence, we encourage you to speak with someone as soon as possible. Understand that if you choose to speak to me as an instructor, I must report your disclosure to my department chair, dean, or the Gender Equity and Title IX Compliance Officer, which may trigger an investigation into the incident. You may also reach out to the Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) Center to discuss your rights and your options with individuals who are not mandatory reporters. https://titleix.wustl.edu/students/confidentiality-resources-support*
Religious Holidays	*To ensure that accommodations may be made for students who miss class, assignments, or exams to observe a religious holiday, you must inform me in writing before the end of the third week of class, or as soon as possible if the holiday occurs during the first three weeks of the semester. For more information, please see the university's Religious Holiday Class Absence Policy.* Email Prof. Schwulst in advance if you foresee missing class for a religious holiday.
Resources for Students	*WashU provides a wealth of support services that address academic, personal, and professional needs. To start exploring resources that can help you along the way, please visit: Resources for Students.*

Acknowledgements

Thanks to current and previous faculty at WashU including Amy Hauft, Jonathan Hanahan, Aggie Tompkins, Eric Nunez, Bei Hu, Aida Lizalde, and Lucas Drummond for guidance.

Thanks also to previous colleagues at Princeton, Yale, and Ultralight School, including David Reinfurt, Meg Miller, Elliott Cost, Jisu Lee, Bryant Wells, Stephen Kwok, Alex Wolfe, Ingrid Burrington, Linked by Air, and many others not explicitly listed who have helped this course come to its current form.

— Laurel Schwulst, August 18, 2025