

English 100-v: Writing about Comics

From the wild assertions of *Unbreakable* and the sudden popularity of films adapted from comics (not just *Spider-Man* or *Daredevil*, but *Ghost World* and *From Hell*), to the abrupt appearance of Dan Clowes and Art Spiegelman all over *The New Yorker*, interesting claims are now being made about the value of comics and comic books. Are they the visible articulation of some unconscious knowledge or desire -- No, probably not. Are they the new literature of the twenty-first century -- Possibly, possibly...

This course offers a reading survey of the best comics of the past twenty years (sometimes called “graphic novels”), and supplies the skills for reading comics critically in terms not only of *what* they say (which is easy) but of *how* they say it (which takes some thinking). More importantly than the fact that comics will be touching off all of our conversations, however, this is a course in *writing* critically: in building an argument, in gathering and organizing literary evidence, and in capturing and retaining the reader's interest (and your own).

Don't assume this will be easy, just because we're reading comics. We'll be working hard this semester, doing a lot of reading and plenty of writing. The good news is that it should all be *interesting*. The texts are all really good books, though you may find you don't like them all equally well. The essays, too, will be guided by your own interest in the texts, and by the end of the course you'll be exploring the unmapped territory of literary comics on your own, following your own nose.

Texts for this Course (all required)

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*
Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*
Will Eisner, *To the Heart of the Storm*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (2 vol.)
Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde*
Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World*
Jason Lutes, *Jar of Fools*
Dylan Horrocks, *Hicksville*
Eddie Campbell, *Alec: How to Be an Artist*
Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics*
Diana Hacker, *Pocket Style Manual*

COURSE OUTLINE**PART ONE: READING COMICS CLOSELY.**

Mon., Sept. 2 Introductions. First assignment explained.

Wed., Sept. 4 *Understanding Comics*. Read through p. 117 (end of ch. 4).

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Mon., Sept. 9 Finish *Understanding Comics*. “A Thousand Words” assignment due in class.

Wed., Sept. 11 Disputing *Understanding Comics*: Read the Dylan Horrocks essay “Inventing Comics.” It's available on Horrocks's website, starting at <<http://www.hicksville.co.nz/Inventing%20Comics.htm>>. You should take notes, or print a copy to bring in to class.

Mon., Sept. 16 Holiday (Yom Kippur.)

Wed., Sept. 18 *Watchmen*. Read through chapter 5 (“Fearful Symmetry”) at least, but feel free to forge ahead.

Mon., Sept. 23 Finish *Watchmen*.
Declaration of an essay topic (400 words) for *Watchmen* is due in class.

Wed., Sept. 25 Workshop on topics. Bring four copies, revised if you like, of the declaration you turned in Monday.

PART TWO: TELLING THE TRUTH IN COMICS

Mon., Sept. 30 First Essay (3-5 p.), on *Watchmen*, due in class. Prepare *To the Heart of the Storm*, through p. 56. Bring *Watchmen* to class as well. Handling the flashback.

Wed., Oct. 2 *To the Heart of the Storm*. Read through p. 128, plus Eisner handouts. Reading rhythm vs. Film rhythm; Page composition. Please see “A Note on the Texts,” below.

Mon., Oct. 7 *To the Heart of the Storm*. Cartoons, caricatures, and stereotypes.

Wed., Oct. 9 *Maus*, vol. 1.

Mon., Oct. 14 *Maus*, vol. 2. Abstract (500 words) on *Maus* or *To the Heart of the Storm* due in class.

Wed., Oct. 16 *Safe Area Gorazde*, through p. 132. Finish *reading* it by Saturday night, okay?

Sunday, Oct. 20. Abstract (500 words) on *Safe Area Gorazde* due to me, by email, by 3:00 PM .

Mon., Oct. 21 Finish discussion *Safe Area Gorazde*.

Tuesday, Oct. 22. Circulate drafts of Second Essay (4-6 pages, on one of the preceding three texts) by email, no later than 3:00 PM

Wed., Oct. 23 Workshop on drafts.

PART THREE: CASEBOOK ON SERIALIZATION

Mon., Oct. 28 Final draft (4-6 pages) of Second Essay due in class. Prepare *Ghost World*, through chapter 4.

Wed., Oct. 30 Finish *Ghost World*.

Mon., Nov. 4 Read *Jar of Fools*, through p. 70 (end of part one).

Wed., Nov. 6 Finish *Jar of Fools*. The secret of Lutes's serialization revealed.

Sunday, Nov. 10. Circulate drafts of Third Essay (4-6 pages) by email, no later than 3:00 PM. This essay may treat any aspect of reading *Jar of Fools* or *Ghost World*. With the prior consent of your peer group, you may *involve* the *Ghost World* movie, but your essay should still deal with the comic.

Mon., Nov. 11 Workshop.

Wed., Nov. 13 Final draft (4-6 pages) of Third Essay due in class. Begin reading *Hicksville*.

PART FOUR: THE FUTURE OF COMICS?

Mon., Nov. 18 *Hicksville*, through the end of chapter 6.

Wed., Nov. 20 Finish *Hicksville*.

Mon., Nov. 25 Proposals (500 wd.) for final essay due in class. We will workshop them.

Wed., Nov. 27 Holiday (Thanksgiving).

Mon., Dec. 2 *Alec: How to Be an Artist*. (Read the whole thing for today's class.)

Wed., Dec. 4 *Reinventing Comics*. Draft of Final Essay (8-10 pages) due in class.

Mon., Dec. 9 *Reinventing Comics*.

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Wed., Dec. 11 Last day of Class. TBA.

I will announce the final due date for the Final Essay in November. It will depend on the exam schedule, and a few other things, but will be after Dec. 11.

THE FINE PRINT*A Note on the Texts:*

The last time I checked, all of the texts were in ample supply at the bookstore student center. You may be able to obtain some of them more cheaply through internet sources, but please get *Understanding Comics* immediately.

The bookstore informs me that textbooks not purchased by **October 5** will be returned to the publishers. Please be sure you have copies of *all* of the texts by that date.

By mid-term, you will want to begin thinking about what texts you'll write your final project on. If you want suggestions, please confer with me, and I'll give you a little steering; at any rate, I'll want to approve your final decision.

Contacting Me:

I will want to meet with each of you individually a few times during the semester, but since I can only be on campus two days a week, we'll need to be clever about when we schedule these meetings. The likeliest way will be for me to schedule blocks on some afternoons between 4:00 and 6:30, though I may also find I am free for lunch meetings, or for appointments between 10:00 and 11:30. Once I figure out what will work, I will distribute appointment calendars about once a week.

Meanwhile, the easiest and most reliable way to contact me is certainly email: I'm on-line frequently, on the days I'm not on campus.

Grades:

The grade for this course will be based on the final versions of your first three essays, the draft of the final essay, the final essay, and your regular attendance and participation, in ascending order of importance. If this suggests a ratio of 13:15:16:17:18:21, I'm sure that's roughly correct.

By *regular attendance and participation*, I don't only mean showing up to class, although that's obviously a part of it. If you are prompt, that will make it easier for us to finish class on time. You should be alert in class, too: I am willing to count people absent, in extreme cases, even when they are in the room. I also mean for you to turn up ready to discuss the material, having prepared it carefully before class. This should go without saying, but for the record: preparation and participation are at least as important as presence.

Your class participation score will also include your degree of preparation and helpfulness when we workshop each others' essays or essay topics. This also includes getting your drafts to your peers on time, and submitting thoughtful abstracts on time when they are due.

About Essay Topics

Although I will give you a set of sample essay topics, and will suggest questions you might address in your essays on *Watchmen*, one of the most important skills we can practice in this course is the skill of finding an interesting essay topic — one that will satisfy both you and your instructor. This is one of the reasons I've got you writing abstracts and declaring topics in advance. It's also something we'll talk about explicitly and frequently in class. Please let your interests be your first guide, but be sure you temper them with a sense of what makes for good literary inquiry.

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“Oh, I Already Read That...”

I anticipate that many of you will have a lasting acquaintance with comics, and that some of you will already know some of the texts on the syllabus. It should go without saying, however, that taking part in this seminar means doing *current* work and not merely validation for a life spent in private study. Even if you already know one of these texts, please be sure to read it again (with fresh eyes), to prepare new questions and interpretations of the text. If these texts are to bear my claim that they are (or verge on) literature, they will need to reward your continued and repeated attention.

Promptness

Because many of your assignments will be submitted to other members of the class, and because I will only be on campus two days a week, getting your essays written on time is *crucial*. I will be willing to grant extensions in only the most extreme circumstances. Please be sure always to begin working on your essays before the day they are due. (Also note that I am going to be looking closely at your style and grammar throughout the term, so you will want to give every draft a thorough inspection for these things, to make them your best. And this *takes time*.)

FOR FURTHER READING

There's actually a surprising amount of good work being done in comics right now, much more than would fit in a single-semester syllabus. That's one of the reasons I'm asking you to venture beyond the syllabus for your final essay. In the following reading list, I'll suggest some directions you might go for the final essay. This is not a complete list of the world's good comics, by any means, but it will give you *much* more to look for than you'll be able to read between now and January. If I say good things about a text here, you can consider it "approved" as a final-essay text, but you should still talk with me about your *topic*, of course.

FURTHER WORK BY THE AUTHORS WE'RE READING

Eddie Campbell collaborated with Alan Moore on *From Hell*, the massive graphic novel about Jack the Ripper recently (and poorly) adapted for the screen. It's intensely impressive, but not for the faint of heart. He also has three other autobiographical collections (*Alec: Three-Piece Suit*, *Alec: the King Canute Crowd*, and *After the Snooter*), as well as a multi-volume series with the god of wine in the present day, called *Bacchus*.

Dan Clowes's work on *Eightball* is almost entirely available in paperback now, or will be before the term is out. *David Boring* represents his clearest attempt at the "graphic novel," and the most recent issue of *Eightball* (#22) does some of the same work in a smaller space. Short pieces are collected in *Twentieth-Century Eightball*, *Caricature*, and *Pussey!*. There's also an early, surrealistic and creepy graphic novel called *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*.

Will Eisner has written a long list of good graphic novels. *Dropsie Avenue*, *A Contract With God*, and *The Dreamer* are among his best, but there are more. Also interesting are his two texts about making comics (*Comics and Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling*) and his early work on *The Spirit*, which is now available (but not cheaply) in archive volumes from DC comics.

Dylan Horrocks has been writing for DC's Vertigo line, a series called *The Names of Magic*. I'm told that it's not bad, but I don't think it's as interesting as *Hicksville*. The follow-up to *Hicksville* (*Atlas*) has only one issue out so far.

Jason Lutes has published the first volume of *Berlin (City of Stones)*, which is on its way to becoming a masterpiece. One issue of the next volume recently appeared.

Scott McCloud cut his teeth writing and drawing a science-fiction comic called *Zot!*, some of which is available on-line at comicbookresources.com.

Alan Moore has a long and impressive list of genre and non-genre comics. His run of *The Swamp Thing* from the 1980s is fairly legendary, and his recent books for America's Best Comics (*Top 10*, *Tom Strong*, *Promethea*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) have a lot to offer. Also a must-read is his collaboration with Eddie Campbell, *From Hell*, and his early works *V for Vendetta* and *Miracleman* have held up pretty well.

Joe Sacco's other major contribution so far is *Palestine*, which was his first sustained piece of comics journalism.

Art Spiegelman edited and contributed to the art-comics magazine *RAW* for a while; he and his wife are currently editing a series of books for children called *Little Lit*.

INTERESTING SUPER-HERO COMICS (no particular order)

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- Mark Waid & Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come*. Was on a previous version of the syllabus. Very interesting if you're familiar with the complicated and ornate DC "mythology"; possibly also interesting if you are wondering what to do with a lifetime's worth of superhero nostalgia. Kill them all -- Build a sort of Planet Hollywood -- Both --
- Kurt Busiek & Alex Ross, *Marvels*. Tells the Marvel mythology from the perspective of a news photographer (not Peter Parker). Some of the sequences may be of particular interest after the recent events at the World Trade Center. Busiek's *Astro City* continues in this "innocent bystander" vein, and is worth looking into (the best arcs are *The Tarnished Angel* and *Confessions*), but never really gets beyond the superhero genre.
- Gerard Jones, et al., *Green Lantern: Mosaic* (DC). A sort of fable about cultural tolerance, starring a Green Lantern and a lot of aliens. Interesting for both story and art, but fairly hard to find (not collected in paperback).
- Although Jack Kirby has his limitations, I still recommend looking at paperback collections of his work from the '60s and '70s when you have an opportunity. The Fourth-World DC titles (except *Jimmy Olsen*) are recently available in this format (e.g. *Jack Kirby's Mister Miracle*), and see below under Stan Lee...
- Jim Krueger, Alex Ross, et al., *Earth X*. A sort of companion (read: imitation) to *Kingdom Come*, though it's really a labor to read. Does make some interesting explanations of Kirby's whacked-out Marvel mythology from the '60s and '70s. (To "get" this one, you should be familiar with the stories in *The Essential Fantastic Four*, vol. 3.) There's a sequel called *Universe X*; don't waste your time on it.
- Stan Lee and many others, *The Essential....* Marvel has recently started issuing affordable paperbacks collecting the old '60s material. The best are undoubtedly the early *Spider-Man* (vol. 1-2) and *Fantastic Four* (vol. 2-3), but they're all interesting reading, and they're a lot of bang for the buck — usually more than twenty issues per paperback. Thor, Hulk, Avengers, Iron Man, X-Men... There's even an *Essential Ant-Man*, though I can't imagine what it contains.
- Frank Miller, *Ronin* (DC), which is a samurai science-fiction tale, but has a lot to say about the psychology of the "adolescent power fantasy." Also worth investigating is Miller's work on *Daredevil* (Marvel).
- And of course there's Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*, both of which were on an earlier version of the syllabus. Very good studies in layout, pacing, and tone, if not in writing. *The Dark Knight Strikes Back* has yet to grow on me.
- James Robinson, et al., *Starman* (1994-2001, DC). A literate, well-realized character within the regular DC continuity. Early stories are available in trade paperback.
- Matt Wagner, et al., *Sandman Mystery Theatre* (DC / Vertigo). This is not the same character as Neil Gaiman's Morpheus, but the original 1930s Sandman, a detective with sleeping gas. Gritty, suspenseful, and interesting. Only one story arc is in paperback, however. Wagner has also written a number of other interesting projects, including *Mage*, and he's most famous for his *Grendel*.

OTHER-GENRE GENRE COMICS

- Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* (Dark Horse) is pretty satisfying — and the art, in particular, is very interesting: highly stylized, angular, high-contrast, asymmetrical. Sort of an *X-Files* meets Jack Kirby's *The Demon*, with a lot of Lovecraft and Nazis thrown in. Best books are the collections of shorts.

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- Kazuo Koike / Gosei Kojima, *Lone Wolf and Cub*. Samurai manga from Japan, but fairly available here in the States. An obvious influence on Frank Miller, particularly the Miller of *Ronin*. A good place to start reading Japanese comics.
- Dave Sim's *Cerebus* is a massive (I mean *long*) ongoing project that moves from one genre to another. It's available in a number of trade paperbacks; I hear that the best are *Jaka's Story* and *Church and State*, but I haven't ventured in yet myself.
- Frank Miller, *Sin City*. I have read only a little of this (it's not to my taste), but if you want to see how far Frank Miller can take "hardboiled," this is the place to look.
- Max Allan Collins & Richard Rayner, *Road to Perdition* (Pocket Books). A gangster story set in the '30s, drawn from real life and from *Lone Wolf and Cub*. Illustrated in a strangely photo-realistic (or engraving-realistic) style that may not work entirely well. Not a bad yarn. Recently made into a movie.
- Tony Millionaire, *Sock Monkey*. (Dark Horse). Totally hilarious, and I'm not entirely sure why. Disturbed, carefully-drawn tales of stuffed animals. Often ends in violence. Is it for kids -- Probably not. Also has a newspaper comic strip (*Maakies*) recently collected in paperback, and *definitely* not for kids.
- Neil Gaiman, et al., *Sandman* (DC / Vertigo). I've found this interesting in patches, but perhaps not quite all it's cracked up to be. Story arcs are available in paperback. If you're interested, you've probably already found it.
- Jaime & Gilbert Hernandez, *Love and Rockets* (Fantagraphics). A genre all their own. Large cast of characters, ranging from broad caricature to subtle observation; by turns sexy, spooky, and funny. Not precisely to my taste, to tell you the truth, but very well done.
- I'm less interested in Terry Moore's *Strangers in Paradise*, which also has elements of the soap-opera proteanism you see in Los Bros. Hernandez. Moore is a capable cartoonist, but I think he leans too hard on a few easy solutions.

LITERARY COMICS

- Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan, Smartest Kid On Earth* (Pantheon) and *Acme Novelty Library* (Fantagraphics). Was on the early version of this syllabus. Bleak and antiseptic, amazingly well crafted. Perhaps not entirely satisfying as a narrative, but some of the most amazing design-work (layouts, color, etc.) you will ever see.
- Jessica Abel is up to something interesting right now called *La Perdida*. Her earlier work, in *Artbabe*, is good, too.
- Howard Cruse, *Stuck Rubber Baby* (Paradox Press) makes some really remarkable claims to novelistic complexity. A coming-of-adulthood story about growing up gay (but closeted) in the segregated South of the '60s. Pretty good.
- James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing* (Drawn & Quarterly). A very satisfying short story about a Jewish minor-league baseball team in the early decades of the twentieth century, facing prejudice and internal troubles on the road.
- David Mazzucchelli, et al. *Paul Auster's City of Glass*. (Neon Lit / Avon) An interesting adaptation of an interesting novella. I had it on a syllabus until I discovered it was out of print. If you can put your hands on it, it'd be good essay material, especially if you're interested in detective fiction.
- Eric Shanower, *Age of Bronze*. Tells the story of the *Iliad*, from beginning to end, but it's only about a tenth of the way there. Uses scholarly sources with real aplomb. The first nine issues are available in a paperback (*A Thousand Ships*). Cartooning style is sort of similar to Jason Lutes's; and interesting comparison might lurk there.

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Adrian Tomine tells short stories about disaffected Gen-Xers in *Optic Nerve*, which has been collected into two paperbacks (*Summer Blonde* and *Sleepwalk*). He's very skilled, but so far his work has left me flat. That alone makes it an interesting study in style, however.

Chester Brown has three or four autobiographical graphic novels, the only one of which I've read yet is *The Playboy*. Dark, self-critical stuff. You could probably put Joe Matt's *Peepshow* in this same category.

James Kochalka has two interesting volumes of *Sketchbook Diaries* that try to make something of his daily life. They're cute, and though I don't think they're literature, they're a really pleasant read.

Craig Thompson, *Good-Bye, Chunky Rice*. Cute, a little weird. A pretty nice story.

Very good brushwork, good cartooning. A little turtle-boy goes on a journey by boat.

Jim Woodring, *Frank* or *The Book of Jim*. Weird. Wordless. Surreal, childlike, haunting.

Brian Ralph's *Cave-In* is also wordless, and cute. He has another book, *Climbing Out*, which I haven't seen yet.

Neil Gaiman & Dave McKean, *Mr. Punch*. Creepy, but affecting. The things kids see but can't understand til they're grownups.

Pekar & Brabnik, *Our Cancer Year*. Got a lot of attention, but I haven't read it myself. I have seen some of Pekar's *American Splendor* work, but I don't know what I could really write about it.

There are a number of anthologies you can look to for interesting new developments, as well: *Drawn & Quarterly*, *Expo 2000* and *Expo 2001* (published by the Small Press Expo), and (if you can find copies) *RAW*.

NEWSPAPER COMICS

I'm not a big expert on newspaper comics. Probably you have seen *Calvin & Hobbes*, which is some really good stuff. Other than that, I really only have a few recommendations:

Walt Kelly, *Pogo*. Collected (by Fantagraphics) in a number of paperbacks. *Pogo* is one of the high points of American newspaper comics, by any standard. A very nice place to look if you're interested in techniques of comedy, caricature, or political satire.

George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*. Not as readily available as I'd like, but it's fairly easy to find samples here and there. Innovative and idiosyncratic. *Krazy Kat* is my favorite of the early newspaper comics, and it's got a lot to recommend it for critical study. One volume in paperback recently printed by Fantagraphics.

Ben Katchor, *Julius Knipl: Real-Estate Photographer*. A really fine "alternative newspaper" strip, now collected in three different books. Urban, yet magic realist in its way. Katchor is also the author of *The Jew of New York*, which I am teaching in my English 105 course.

(And I should put in a plug for my friend Jesse Reklaw's *Slow Wave*. Appears weekly in the *Advocate*, and is collected in paperback (called *Dreamtoons*). Also available on the web (<www.slowwave.com>) and archived there. Interesting stuff, for our purposes, because the form is constraining, yet the "script" each week is essentially a found object.)

THE UNDERGROUNDS

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This is another field where I'm no great expert. The big name in the field is R. Crumb, and his work is available in a number of formats. He's an incredible cartoonist — maybe one of the greatest of all time — but he has yet to write any really sustained narrative.

Also worth looking into, from the underground crowd and influenced by it, are Bill Griffith, Kim Deitch, Justin Green, Phoebe Gloeckner, Gilbert Shelton, Aline Kominsky, Diane Noomin, and a few of their successors: Pete Bagge, Roberta Gregory, Shannon Wheeler, Julie Doucet, and Ivan Brunetti...

Assignment #1
“A Thousand Words”**Due (on paper) in class, Monday September 9**

This assignment has two purposes: first, it is a diagnostic by which I can assess your prose style, and determine what points of grammar and style to cover in class this term. More importantly, however, it will give you an opportunity to practice description of a comics text at different degrees of resolution. Controlling the pace and clarity of your evidence will be important in all the papers you write this term, and this will be your first chance to practice those skills

The assignment comes in four parts, each of which should be within 10% of 250 words — between 225 and 275 words. That's a considerable amount of leeway, actually, but *do not submit the assignment without doing a “word count”* with your word-processing program and making sure the count is accurate. (This restraint will force you to consider your pace, among other things.)

In each of the four sections, you will be describing some part of a comic book. I will distribute disposable “nickel-bin” comics with this assignment on the first day of class. (Don't expect much reading satisfaction from these; they're simply meant to be the object of scrutiny for the scrutiny's sake, you know.)

Return these comics with the assignment, so I can see what you're describing.

Part One: A picture.

Choose the single most interesting panel in the comic. Describe it in 250 words. You will want to concern yourself, most likely, with questions of composition as well as the “events” of the panel. Do not choose a “splash page” (a single-panel page) for this part of the assignment.

Part Two: A page.

Choose the single most interesting page in the comic, and in 250 words describe that page. As in Part One, you'll want to look at both composition and content. You may choose the same page that the panel in Part One appears on, but make your two descriptions independent. (That is, don't say, “See the previous page.”) If you want to write about a splash page, do it in this Part.

Part Three: A plot.

In 250 words, describe what happens in the comic as a whole: summarize the important events. Indicate what you know about the characters *only* to the extent that it matters to the plot.

Part Four: A style.

Choose either the drawing style or the narrative approach of the comics creator(s). In 250 words, describe that style or approach. For art style, you can consider things like line, action, composition, detail, and layout; for narrative approach you can consider pacing, dialogue, exposition, flashbacks, symbolism, and any number of literary techniques. You may, in your 250 words, be evaluative as well as descriptive, but description should be your focus in this assignment.

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For this assignment and every subsequent one, please be sure to double-space your work, in a font of reasonable size, and from a legible printer. Leave margins of at least one inch (1.25 is better), so I have room to make comments. Number your pages and put your last name on each page.