

Graphic Design Thesis:
A Survivor's Guide
by Michael Vanderbyl

COURSE TITLE _ GRAPHIC DESIGN THESIS: A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE

INSTRUCTORS _ Michael Vanderbyl teaches every semester.

Leslie Becker and Jennifer Morla rotate. Dr. Karen Fiss, historian/theoretician, is research advisor to thesis students. Additional studio faculty, including Bob Aufuldish and Mark Fox, teach the course based on enrollment.

SCHOOL _ California College of Arts and Crafts

FREQUENCY _ Fifteen weeks, meets one day per week for a minimum of six hours.

CREDITS _ Three

LEVEL _ Undergraduate. Thesis is the final requirement of the graphic design major, following completion of 48 required units in the major.

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purpose

Graphic Design Thesis is designed to define the complex intersection between personal voice, conceptual understanding, and the ability to conduct and use research effectively in the service of creating a compelling, finely crafted public communication.

description of classes

With the exception of the initial class meeting (presentation of topic), midterm critique and the final critique, each student meets with two faculty members individually every week. Faculty rotate, so that if, for example, four faculty are teaching, the student will always be reviewed by one faculty member from the prior week and one faculty member who has not seen the student for two weeks (addressing the needs for continuity and fresh perspective). Student progress in research and form development is assessed and redirected as necessary. Faculty do not always agree with each other, but at this level of development, the disagreements often serve to inform.

Introduction

Thesis (Graphic Design 5) is the culmination of your design education at CCAC. It was created by Michael Vanderbyl to challenge and ultimately broaden our understanding of what it means to be a designer. The class is largely self-directed and presents you with an extraordinary opportunity to identify an area

of interest and investigate it, using design as the vehicle through which you present your findings.

Students are graded on the creation and presentation of four components: a thesis proposal, research, a thesis project, and a process book.

The Thesis Proposal

The thesis proposal is a proposition or argument—usually based on an original observation—which you intend to support through research. The proposal might detail your anticipated investigation or address the potential implications of your proposition.

Successful Thesis Proposals

Your thesis proposal is your map for the semester. A clear, well-written proposal will direct your research, the form of your thesis project, and its design. A muddy, illogical proposal will lead you into the design wilderness, where animals, faculty, and other nasties will nip at your heels.

Let's consider the following proposal (reproduced in its entirety) from Toshie Hayakawa:

I will examine how national identity is reflected and defined by the idea of size in the United States and Japan.

You will find that brevity is a blessing for both inaugural speeches and thesis proposals. That aside, what argument is the student making? What is her thesis? Namely, that national identity is reflected and defined by the idea of size in the U.S. and Japan. Simple.

Here is a more complex proposal written by Ellen Gould:

Text as Memory

Visual organization plays a crucial role in any effort to receive or recover written information. I intend to show that the visual form of a text can serve as an aid to memory, by developing new mnemonic systems for the page.

Drawing on medieval practices known as the "Art of Memory," I want to introduce the architectural mnemonic—the room as a unit of memory—into the world of print, where the page becomes a unit of memory. Of particular importance is the idea that typographic space provides an additional level of meaning and is essential to the visual memory of text.

Longer, yes, but equally compelling. (If this were a steak, it would be large but lean—all the fat has been trimmed off.) The observation? Reread the first sentence. The proposition? Reread the second sentence. The anticipated investigation? Look at the third sentence. The map is neatly in place, for both the student and the faculty.

Unsuccessful Thesis Proposals

Consider the following proposal:

Functional objects for the home are aesthetically enhanced as a method of enticing and delighting the user. I intend to examine the relationship of the aesthetic enhancement to the object and whether it enables, overpowers, destroys, or eclipses its function. In addition, I will examine the cases in which functional objects of business have been introduced and popularized in the home office through aesthetic enhancement.

What is the student's thesis? Reread the proposal.

There is no thesis because there is no argument. That functional objects for the home are aesthetically enhanced to entice and delight the user (i.e., the consumer) is well known and not surprising. What are objects for the home supposed to do, anyway? Frustrate and torment the user? This is not an argument because no one would argue the point. It is an observation only, and an obvious one at that.

Unsuccessful proposals tend to rely on sloppy writing, which stems from sloppy thinking. Consider the following statement excerpted from a proposal:

Technology has led to the death of interaction among people.

Really? The death? Don't we use technology to interact when we make a telephone call? When we hand a store clerk a credit card? There may be a decline in meaningful interaction in America in 2002, but is this due to technology? If so, which technology? And what is meant by "technology" anyway?

Don't disregard logic (or what we know) to try to prove your point. A proposal that raises questions because it is illogical or confusing is unhelpful to both you and your audience. Recall that design is a communication art, not an obfuscation art.

Tips:

1. Start with what interests you. What are you obsessed with? What are you passionate about? What do you like reading and thinking about? What topic will sustain your interest for fifteen weeks?
2. Make sure you *have a point*. What are you arguing?
3. Do not base your proposal on the obvious. For example, noting that "gardens have become a pseudo-version of nature" is not a new or original observation, and few would argue this point.
4. Shorter is usually better. Pretend your proposal is a logo: if it ain't necessary, take it out.
5. Think through your claims. Are they true? Logical? Do you believe them? Will others believe them? If they are true, what are the ramifications? (Exploring the ramifications may be the bulk of your project!)
6. Do not make sweeping statements for dramatic effect or without supporting them with documentation.
7. Define your terms. What do you mean by "aesthetics" or "utopia"? And use the most common definitions of these terms! A proposal that depends on the least-used definitions of key words is doomed.

8. Do not claim that you will prove anything—we are designers, not cold-fusion scientists.
9. Please be aware that you will revise your proposal as your research dictates and your process evolves. (Sometimes it will change completely—including your topic!) The fortunate aspect of this is that all of your writing and rewriting will become content for your process book.

Research

Readings, visual audits, interviews, and bibliography. Generally speaking, research will form the backbone of your project: it is the structural support on which your design flesh will hang. Done properly, research will help you generate ideas and hone your concept. The following notes on research were adapted from a text written by Karen Fiss.

Research for this class involves developing a thesis (a proposition or argument) that you will support with primary and secondary sources. The purposes of your research are many: to understand how to evaluate what you see and read; to develop your own opinions and critical frameworks based on informed judgments—not simply on what you like and don't like; to acquire the critical skills to discern reliable/useful sources from the junk; to evaluate your own work in light of what you learn through research; to develop your own understanding of the relationship of history/theory to practice; and, ultimately, to have the chance to explore a topic that interests you in a more in-depth fashion.

You can use materials from your everyday life as research, but you should also be reading texts of intellectual merit. Generally speaking, a source has “intellectual merit” if that source has been “juried.” (All university press books and journals are juried.) This means that each manuscript is first sent out to a series of “experts” in the field of inquiry and then rewritten and edited according to their recommendations. Realize that you cannot overly depend on one source, but that you will need to find multiple sources offering different perspectives on your subject. You will then need to evaluate these different opinions in order to forge your own argument.

You should develop a bibliography first. Make sure you can get your hands on the materials and determine the usefulness and merit of each source. When you find a good text, you should mine its footnotes and bibliography for additional sources. You should also use catalogue databases. There are dozens of specialized databases devoted to different disciplines. This “book and article” research should become an organic component of your working process. You need to learn how to delimit your topic, when to stop reading, when to make things, and when to return to reading to refine your ideas.

The Web can be a useful research tool. A word of caution, however: you need to learn how to evaluate Web sites just as you need to learn how to evaluate the scholarly merit of printed texts. In the humanities, printed texts still tend to be more reliable than Web sources.

Tips:

1. Let your topic dictate the type of research you do, and have an idea of what you are looking for.
2. Maintain a level of cynicism. Be critical of your sources, and do not merely adopt a point of view without reading competing sources/opinions.
3. Consult with an expert mentor in your chosen field of study. His input will be invaluable.
4. Develop a system for note-taking as you read. Transcribe salient thoughts and quotes as you encounter them so you don't waste time looking for them later.
5. Footnote your sources.
6. Avoid reading pseudo-science. Remember *Chariots of the Gods?* (It held that extraterrestrials built the pyramids at Giza. It was a best-seller.)
7. Interviewing all of your friends about your topic is not research of intellectual merit.

The Thesis Project

The thesis project is a proposition or argument explicated by design and supported by research.

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Your thesis project is the physical manifestation of, and the conclusion to, your thesis proposal. The form that it takes should be determined by the nature of your proposal and its content: "Form-making in the service of an idea," as Michael Vanderbyl has put it. Some proposals will best be explored in a time-based medium like video; other ideas will communicate more effectively as installations or as books. The goal is to wed your proposal with the most appropriate form for your message. (You may not know the exact form your thesis will take until midterm, or shortly thereafter.) Successful thesis projects have taken a variety of forms over the years, and have included book design, furniture design, installations, multimedia design, painting, performance, sound design, type design, and video.

Interestingly, Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, works in a similar way to thesis students. Louis Menand describes her creative process: "The response is where Lin starts her work as a designer. . . . There is no image in her head, only an imagined feeling. Often, she writes an essay explaining what the piece is supposed to do to the people who encounter it." The form of the project only comes to Lin after she has articulated the purpose/intended effect of the project.

Regardless of the form your thesis project takes, you should be aware that you are creating a narrative—that you are in fact engaged in the process of making an argument. What is your core message? (What is the one thought your audience will walk away with after experiencing the piece?) What are your

secondary messages, and what is their relationship to the core message? What are the ramifications of this message? (What is its meaning to you, to me, to society, to design?) How are you supporting this core message? What evidence—visual and otherwise—are you supplying to argue your point? The novelist Anna Quindlen offers a piece of advice for writers that is applicable to the thesis students: learn to distinguish between those details that simply exist and those that reveal. Do not merely compile information, in other words, but choose, edit, and present your content to inform, surprise, entertain, challenge, and argue.

Think about the sequence and pacing of this narrative. What is your introduction? (A well-written thesis proposal usually functions as a *de facto* introduction.) What is your conclusion? Consider the tone of your narrative. Is it authoritative? Reverential? Tongue-in-cheek?

If your thesis project explores a personal theme, it is incumbent upon you to make the personal universal. As Vanderbyl has noted, “Communication is the crux of thesis and the crux of the profession.” If your project is so personal that it fails to communicate, it fails.

Tips:

1. Do not have preconceived ideas about what form your project will take. Let the form be determined by your proposal and content.
2. Create a written outline of your narrative/argument diagramming your core and secondary messages. This outline, when paired with visuals and select research, will serve as a guide to the realization of your thesis project.
3. Give your audience “multiple access points” to your content. Deliver your information on several levels: the “quick read,” or overview, as well as the elaborations. The overview will allow you to hook them and then lead them deeper into your content.
4. The visual language of your thesis should be appropriate to your subject/content. (Bauhaus Modernism might create a cognitive dissonance if your subject is poodles, for instance.)
5. If you are unfamiliar with your chosen medium—video, for instance—don’t assume you will successfully accomplish your project in ten (or seven or five or three) weeks. Make realistic time allowances for the inevitable learning curve.
6. Approach the idea of creating an installation with some trepidation. It is extremely difficult to do well!

The Process Book

A bound record of your thinking and design process.

Your process book should include your writing, research, design investigations, successes, and failures—in short, it should document how you got from point A to point Z in fifteen weeks. (Include all of your steps, including

abandoned topics!) It should also include annotated footnotes and a bibliography. For those who create something temporal as their thesis project (like a performance piece or installation), the process book is quite likely the only artifact from the thesis you will be able to show a prospective employer in an interview.

Tips:

1. Work on your process book in tandem with your thesis project. Sometimes at midterm it becomes clear that the process book is actually a better model for the thesis project than your proposed prototype. (If you haven't worked on your process book you lose the opportunity to make this observation.)
2. Consider hiring a bindery to bind your book. It'll look swell . . .

Strategies

The gulf between an interesting topic and a workable proposal can be vast. The goal here is to elucidate an original observation about your topic—to make us (your audience) reconsider the topic or see it in a new light.

A perfect example of this can be found in Michael Pollan's book *The Botany of Desire*. In it, Pollan proposes a refreshing thesis: namely, that plants have evolved to gratify certain human desires so that humans will grow these plants and further their species. In short, plants are using us. (If you are interested in how he arrived at this observation you should read the first few pages of Pollan's introduction.) Pollan's thesis was (unconsciously) arrived at by adopting a conceptual strategy. He took the prevailing opinion—humans use plants—and proposed the opposite: plants use humans. This is a strategy of opposition, and is the basis for a student arguing that “suburbia is utopia,” or that “driving an automobile is an illusion of freedom.”

Other strategies include using the personal to communicate the universal; examining societal taboos (the public/private space of the public bathroom); proposing new avenues for design (designing a typeface for dyslexics); or elevating the little-noticed to a place of prominence in the world (“the mechanical click is an essential intermediary between humans and machines”).

Tips:

1. Your topic is separate from your thesis proposal. It is possible to have a promising topic and a problematic thesis proposal. Learn when to jettison your topic and when to merely rework your proposal.

Sequence/Schedule

Jennifer Morla recommends adhering to the following sequence of work:

Research > Analysis > Design Intent > Methodology > Fabrication > Documentation

Research: From readings, visual audits, interviews, observations, etc.

Analysis: What have I learned from this research? What does it mean?

(Diagrams are organized research.)

Design Intent: What could I do with this research? What point am I trying to make? (What is my thesis?)

Methodology: How could I do it? What would be the best form to convey my ideas? (Is it a book, film, etc.?)

Fabrication: How will I make it? Do I need to collaborate with anyone to make it?

Documentation: Your process book.

Your own experience will no doubt be more fluid than the sequence outlined above, but this should help you create a schedule so you know you are making progress at the correct pace. In a perfect world you will have determined your methodology by midterm.

Midterm

Generally speaking, your midterm crit will be more challenging than your final crit. There are two reasons for this: you will be reviewed by the full thesis committee for the first time, and they will be unfamiliar with your thesis; moreover, at midterm there is still time to address fundamental deficiencies in your thesis proposal. At midterm you will present a refined thesis proposal and a detailed prototype (or layouts, storyboards, scale drawings, etc.) of your thesis project. Your process book—truly “in process” and not bound—and a schedule detailing how you will execute your thesis project in the remaining weeks are due as well.

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Tips:

1. Tape record your midterm crit so you can review the committee's comments at a later date. Some of the criticism may not make sense to you until later and you risk forgetting valuable insights.
2. Take responsibility for your critiques. What is it you want to know? What feedback are you looking for? Ask questions. If your critique is generating unhelpful information, change the direction of the critique.
3. If your thesis proposal and project are insupportable at the midterm, you should seriously consider withdrawing from the course. You have until the tenth week of the semester to do so.

conclusion

This class may be the only time in your life when you will be encouraged to research an area of personal interest, author an original viewpoint, and then

design a piece of your choosing to showcase this research and viewpoint. It is a tremendous opportunity that should be both challenging and fun. Make the most of it! As your faculty, we are committed to helping you do so.

Bob Aufuldish, Leslie Becker, Karen Fiss, Terry Irwin, Jim Kenney, Jennifer Morla, and Michael Vanderbyl contributed to the ideas and text of this guide.

addendum one: further examples of successful thesis proposals

A Proposal by Ellen Malinowski: Context Yields Definition

A word's meaning consists of its inherent definition and the interpretation implied by the context in which it is used. Context is the tool we use to grasp meaning, and in some cases it dictates meaning when the definition of a word is unintelligible. I intend to show that a word does not have meaning without context regardless of its established definition. I will undermine the process by which language is understood in order to subvert the idea of definition.

A Proposal by Wendy Li

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We live in a world of globalization, an age of fast information exchange and mobility. With the blurring of boundaries, what in the world is authentic? I intend to question the existence of authenticity. In my exploration, I will examine the notion of authenticity by juxtaposing the old to the new, the primitive to the modern, and the natural to the artificial.

addendum two: advice and observations from fellow students

Three Tips

1. Don't believe *anything* you've heard about the instructors; none of it is true. Those preconceived notions might cause you to be on the defensive during crits rather than receptive to helpful advice and criticism. They know what they are talking about, and they know a lot.
2. The more original the topic, the more fun you will have, and the better response you will get. The more cliché the topic, the more struggle you will have finding an interesting angle that hasn't already been done.
3. Stating a thesis means you have to *make a point*. (Ellen Malinowski)

Make a Schedule

I made a very rough schedule for my project right after the first class. I divided the semester into six phases according to the steps Jennifer mentioned (research, analysis, design intent, methodology, fabrication), so that my project could be produced properly. I think it was very helpful for me to maximize the limited number of crit sessions. I needed to do a lot of work everyday to meet the schedule, but I found that the more I investigated during the week, the more I could show at the crit. The more I showed at the crit, the more feedback I received. A schedule enabled me to work steadily to complete the project, and spared me from doing everything at the last moment. (Aya Akazana)

Make Connections

Imagine Thesis as a cross between a research paper and a design project. Once I realized the connection between assembling a research paper and assembling a design project, things started to happen for me. I had to learn how to connect seemingly disparate ideas together, and not to be afraid to look outside the cultural theory realm to find some answers. (Amy Lam)

Research

Address students to do research in *support* of their project. Some people were just doing research randomly and wasting their time because they were simply told to do so. (Helena Seo)

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Trust Yourself

It's impossible to please all four instructors, so ultimately you must make decisions based on your own intuition and design sense. (Amelia Leclaire)

This class was set up in such a way that each week we were looking for approval. There came a point at which waiting for approval was counterproductive and I just had to have faith that I could run with the concept. (Rosana Mojica)

Last Thoughts

Words cannot justly describe how profound an effect Thesis had on me. In addition to the self-discipline, Thesis pushed me to really see things as a designer and artist in a whole new realm. The vigor and intensity have given me a whole new approach to my work. (Rachel Pearson)

This class really helped me to learn how to *think*, how to *plan*, and how to *convey*. And not only the aspects of improving my visual skill; it gave me a great opportunity to understand myself better. I found out what I'm good at, and more importantly what I'm *not* good at. (Helena Seo)

I appreciated the Thesis faculty's interest in my project. Up to this point most of my work was seen as "weird" by instructors and students alike. It still is, but I see it as a strength now. Weird is good. Weird is me. The class had the level of thoughtfulness and intensity I looked forward to when I enrolled at level three. (Eugene Young)