Before you start your final college semester, and while you are unwinding from your penultimate semester, a little prep work for your immediate future will reap big dividends in April.

For the next few weeks, over holiday, THINK THESIS.

Formulating a thesis is a problem-finding process. Begin the process by answering the following questions.

1. **What interests me?** Maybe it’s something you read about or heard about that caught your fancy. Maybe it’s a project that made you say, “Wow! I wish I could do a deeper and richer exploration of this topic.” If you are compelled by a topic you are more likely to engage with it profoundly, enjoy it, and see its potentials. Perhaps it is a form you fell in love with, such as the poster or the web site or the book. Perhaps your thesis springs from your career interest, for instance, a career in magazine design. In this case, a semester-long exploration of some aspect of editorial design might be beneficial.

2. **Why do I want to pursue this interest?** Maybe you’ve already answered this question, but if not, answer it.

3. **How can I turn my interest into a topic?** Let’s say your interest is in cameras. Then your topic might coalesce around: “why cameras never lie, but people do” or “why good camera design is self-evident operation” or “why snapshots taken between the late 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th century are more visually complex because the pace of life permitted it.” Take your interest and examine it, break it down, and see how many paths cross through your topic.

4. **Why do I want to do this topic?** Once again, you may have already answered this question, but, if not, answer it now.

5. **To whom do I tell my story, and why do they want to hear it?** Every design needs an audience. What is your audience, and what will it get out of your design. You will probably revisit this question several times as you identify your thesis and refine it.

6. **How does my interest (and the various paths I’ve figured out in question three) intersect with design?** For example, if your interest is table lamps, how do you turn table lamps into a viable design thesis project? Perhaps you design a book about the social implications of the humble table lamp or an interactive CD on the table lamp in history or a web site about module design in table lamps?

No later than January, you’ll need to state your thesis in a simple, clear question. I’m going to ask you for that question in January. **At that time you will present at least three possible thesis ideas.**

Some questions to ponder or re-ponder whilst you are formulating your simple, clear question:

- **What am I trying to achieve by doing this thesis?** Are you exploring a form or questioning an established belief or expanding on a known fact or proving an assumption? What will you have achieve once the thesis is concluded at the end of April?
- **What’s the purpose of my thinking?** Purpose, as in, why are you going to commit considerable thinking and effort to your thesis topic? Are you trying to change your audiences’ attitudes? Are you calling your audience to an action? Do you only want your audience to reflect about your topic?
- **What’s the problem I’m trying to solve? What is my main point?** It is vitally important to define exactly what is the problem before you write your thesis question. Don’t jump to an answer without asking lots of questions. Questions are good. They are open, and at this stage of the process, you need to be open to all possibilities. The problem may not be what it appears to be; you must question any of your assumptions.

For instance, say you want to do a project about green-spaces. You might begin by asking why you want to do a thesis about green-spaces. And you might answer because they are places to get away from the fast pace of modern life. Why is that important? Because it helps reduces stress. Why not just read a book? Because green-spaces gets one outdoors. Why not read a book outdoors? Because reading a book isn’t physical activity. What’s so good about physical activity? Because studies have shown that physically active people have 25% fewer heart attacks than non-physically active people. Why not do the physical activity at home? Because you encounter other people while outdoors, and the experience becomes social. Why is social activity important? Because it helps reverse the insular lifestyle encouraged by television, video games, and the computer.

And so on.
By questioning, I have started to identify not only a possible thesis topic, but some secondary elements I might include. This exercise will also remind you of how all things are connected: actions have motives, consequences, causes and effects, intentions must be articulated.

Just keep asking why until you get to the purpose of your thesis. Then you can define exactly what is the problem to be solved and the goal to be achieved.

Once you think you have a thesis idea, put it to a test by asking these questions:

- Do I really understand the thesis I think I want to pursue?
- Have I assumed anything that may not be so?
- Have I overlooked anything that might adversely affect my thesis?
- Do I need more information before I commit to my thesis?
- Aside from my primary point, are there any important secondary ones to consider?
- Is my proposal engaging but not obvious to my audience?
- What makes your thesis necessary to you and to others?
- What is the important thing your audience will take from your thesis?
- How does your thesis apply to you, to your audience, to society, and to design?

It is vital that you question your proposed thesis problem. Keep in mind that it is possible to build an argument that seems completely logical, but fails because it is based on a faulty premise. You don’t want to expend great amounts of semester time only to discover that the thesis was faulty to begin with; you need to see its faults before you begin.

Now that you have answered all the above questions successfully, you have identified your thesis.

One final question: Why do you want to do this thesis? Maybe you’ve already answered this question. If not, you are required to answer it now. If you mentally answered, “because it’s required,” then you just left the gate running in the wrong direction. Make your thesis something YOU want to do and your audience will find compelling.

Linus Pauling said, “The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.”

**REQUIREMENTS**

1. **Keep a log book and use it.** Begin with your first glimmering (that’s a fancy way of saying start now). Your log book is NOT your process book. But it will help you put together your process book. I want you to answer the questions outlined in the first part of this document, and record the process in your log book. Bring the log book to our first class in January.

2. **Begin preliminary research into your topic.** Log it.

3. **Buy a calendar and use it.** (We’ll talk about this early in January).

4. **Formulate your path of interest into a project brief.** This project belongs to you. This time, you decide the problem to be solved, the form it will take, and virtually everything else. For some, this can be a scary prospect, but it is time for you to fly solo. Your preliminary project brief is due at the first class meeting next semester for each of your (at least) three preliminary thesis ideas.

5. **Your thesis must be worthy** (of a semester-long study).

6. **The process book.** This time there is no shirking since this book is a significant part of your grade. You will make two copies of this precious book: one for us and one for yourself. The book will contain the narrative of your thesis development. Contained within its covers is found your research notes, annotated bibliography, development sketches (unsuccessful, as well as, successful), ideas (unsuccessful, as well as, successful), final imagery

7. **Preparing and participating in the Senior Thesis Show.** This is mandatory. Set up time and date to be determined. Work will be up for one week.

8. **Documentation. Documentation. Documentation.** You must have your work photographed and submitted to the University of Tennessee Graphic Design Department. Once we have the slides, you can make duplicates for yourself.

**KEEP IN MIND**

There will be a series of cutoff points I will outline in January. Each of you are required to make these cutoff points. Failure to do so will carry a penalty.

At each thesis meeting you will present new work demonstrating progress from your previous presentation. Failure to do so will carry a penalty.

It is not too late to fail to graduate. I will document your performance.