



**surviving
graphic
design
critique**

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Why do we critique?

This guide is especially for Graphic Design students and early professionals, in an effort to set common goals, language, and parameters, in order for everyone to get the most out of formalized critiques.

Crit Day. The words alone send shivers down the spine of many a current and former design student. Memories of work being savaged by peers and professors, or worse, ignored, make the act of critique difficult and emotionally wrenching. But it doesn't have to be this way! Critique can and should be a positive experience, resulting in better finished work, and growth personally and professionally.

You may wonder why we even bother doing this. It's hard. It requires 'a thick skin', dedication, serious thought, and it's often a real marathon. But there are several very good reasons that the critique has been included in design and art curriculum for the past century (and perhaps even longer).

One obvious reason for critique is to actively help your fellow students improve their work. This is done through constructive, supportive conversation that explores all aspects of a piece: formal, narrative, craft, and presentation. Your informed opinion, as a reviewer, gives your fellow students the feedback that they need to push forward. Roadblocks are overcome, issues are raised, and new ideas are generated.

While helping others is reason enough for crits, we also benefit in less altruistic ways. Analyzing the work of others helps us to hone our own design eye. The act of breaking down a piece helps us to recognize why we react in certain ways, what works and what doesn't, and it gives us ideas for places we might go on future (and current) projects. Perhaps you will be introduced to a technique you hadn't tried yet, or a type-

face you feel could be applied to a project in another class. Actively taking notes during the time reserved for critique can help you reap the most benefit from these conversations.

Furthermore, watching the class breakdown your own work can help you to understand much more about yourself and your decision making as a designer. They may recognize patterns in your work, including tropes you may find yourself falling back on unconsciously. You may find that you can't explain why you did a certain thing, allowing you to see where you are working on instinct and where you are working from reason. This knowledge of the self will make you a more conscious and mature designer over time.

The goals of critique

By giving and receiving critique, you will build your skills for verbally describing and discussing your work. Often this is called "defending your work," but the combative nature of that language is sometimes unhelpful. Critique is almost always done verbally, as are client presentations and studio critique in the real [post-college] world. The ability to be aware of your work, and to describe your intentions in a way that is easily understandable to someone less intimately attached to it than yourself, will take you far in your design career. Often, the designer who is promoted to

art director isn't the one making the most mind-blowing work; it's the one who offers the best feedback in meetings!

Critique will inevitably result in a separation between yourself and your work. There's no other way around it—if you can't learn to stand next to your work, rather than exist inside of it, you will find these experiences to be gut wrenching and damaging to your sense of self. Becoming an objective observer to your own work will make you a better participant in the act of design. While separating from your own work, you will become closer to the others in the critique group. If done well, with supportive parameters and agreed upon rules of engagement, group critiques can even bond a class or a cohort together! You will cease to see each other as competitors. Instead, you will be compatriots, fighting the same fight, and operating on the “rising tide” theory of engagement.

Roles in Critique

There are two distinct roles that must be filled in order for a crit to be successful—the critic, and the designer. In a single critique setting you'll fill both roles at different times, so you must understand the responsibilities of each.

The Critic

The critic is the role that most students, as well as the instructor, will fulfill whenever their work is not getting shown. While this is obvious, it's also important to remember that you are in this role at all times when your work is not up for discussion. This means you should never be a passive observer in the critique process. There's no role for “sitting in the back zoning out”, or “checking my Instagram likes”. You must be engaged with the discussion at all times.

The critic's job is the carefully and thought-

fully analyze the work up for discussion, considering compositional elements, narrative and meaning, while choosing words that are both supportive and honest. And of course, these thoughts should be converted into words and offered to the designer, not bottled inside and kept to oneself. Silent analysis is not helpful in the critique setting.

The Designer

The designer is a single person (or group of persons) who made the design which is being discussed. This person's job is to be articulate, thoughtful, and receptive to feedback. This role requires a great amount of comfort with vulnerability! Most critiques, if done well, will result in a large amount of criticism of designed work (hence the term, “critique”). This is a good thing, but will challenge the designer to be open to change and rework, and sometimes, even going back to the drawing board.

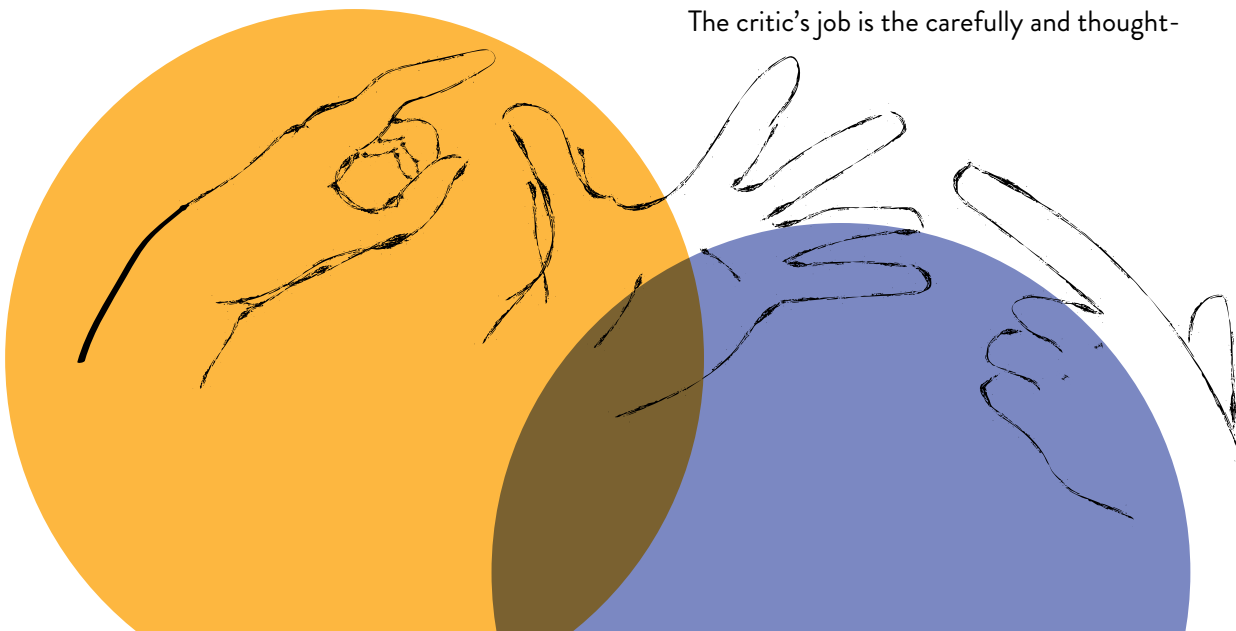
Critical Analysis of Graphic Design

Much has been written about critique in the art world, and we should all understand the formal elements of design and art, but it's not always top of mind when we are actually in the room. The following is an overview of what you should be thinking about the role of critic.

The Brief

One of the major components that separates design from fine art is the existence of a brief. The brief lays out for the designer what they should be trying to achieve from a messaging and audience perspective. Briefs are not unique to design school. In fact, they are the most basic and integral document in any professional design project. The brief is The Word—it must be referred to throughout a crit as the ultimate target that all design work should be aiming at.

Who is the audience outlined in the brief? Who should you, as the designer, be speaking to? And what is the intended message being sent to that audience? If your brief describes a pre-teen audience as receiving an advertisement for a new sugary snack, you'd probably be best to avoid references to Dadaism, explicit language, or other things that would be clearly inappropriate to this goal, regardless of how beautifully designed the work is.



Both formal and narrative aspects of a piece should be evaluated against the parameters of the brief. Try not to get sucked into falling in love with someone's work if it is off-topic, or doesn't follow the guidelines described. Similarly, while you are working on your own projects, commit to holding true to the brief. Print it out, pin it up, write down key words that you want to remember. Constantly refer back to this as your own little project Bible.

to avoid criticism

**say nothing
do nothing
be nothing**

Formal elements

Every designed work is an interplay of form and content, resulting in the broadcasting of a message. Form is defined as the visual elements that are combined to create a composition; content is the meaning the designer has embedded. Form includes line, shape, image, color, and typography. Content is narrative, word choice, interpretation, and transparency of meaning. These two categories should be analyzed both independently, and for their effect on each other.

Edges and Borders

The obvious edge is the border of the piece itself; the dimensions of the final composition. We must consider whether compositional elements are interacting with this edge, or not, and if these interactions create tensions (in a good way, or in a bothersome way). How are elements cropped to the edge? Are elements running full-bleed to the edge, or are they all fully enclosed in the space?

The second edge we should consider is the interactions between the edges of elements. The way in which these elements play together can create movement of the eye, rhythm between visual “notes,” or can

build tension. Consider these edges, and whether the affect of them adds to the message of the piece, detracts from it, or confuses it.

Line and Shape

Line and shape are used on their own as a part of visual language, or are combined and refined to create illustration. Lines can be implied, as when several individual elements are connected by the eye into an invisible line. Consider the arrangement and the size hierarchy of line and shape. How does the gestural quality, or digital quality, straightness or organic quality add to the messaging?

Color

Color can have a massive impact on a composition, and is influenced by personal taste, cultural connotations, and individual perceptions. Some things are certain. For instance, a single small red word, in a field of black words, will immediately jump to the top of a hierarchy. Blue and orange, set next to each other, will vibrate. But our reading of color (do we like it or not, do we find it pleasing or dissonant) will vary based on the reader.

To eliminate these variables, and avoid wasting valuable crit time discussing personal preferences, consider color in terms of its meaning and its role in the design. Think about how vibrant a tone is, how colors

juxtaposed change, and what the particular intended audience will read. Think about the greater culture. For instance, will pink appeal to a female audience, or turn them off as overdone or offensive? Is a camo pattern too obvious in a militaristic setting, or does it actually work?

Imagery

Imagery considerations can apply to photography, illustration, or any form of mark-making that results in an abstract or representational image of a recognizable object. Imagery can be transparent in its reading (it’s obvious to the viewer what they are seeing, as is common in photography), or opaque in its reading (it’s unclear what exactly the thing is, giving the viewer a chance to impact the composition through their own interpretation). Which of these is best, or whether a balance of the two is best, depends largely on the designer’s intention. Sometimes there isn’t a right answer, and it’s more about fitting image quality to the larger visual language employed.

One practical consideration in image-making is resolution. It’s very important that imagery be produced in a way that doesn’t become distracting from the final composition. Obvious pixels, or errors in drawing such as pencil or eraser lines, do not add to a composition, and can seriously detract from the overall quality of a design. Be sure to point out if you observe errors like this, and clarify if it is an issue of presentation quality (such as the designer exporting a low-res version), or if the image



needs to be remade in a way that is meeting the quality standards for its medium (300dpi for print, 72dpi for web, 220 for retina displays, etc).

Typography

Most graphic designs include typography as a messaging and compositional element. It’s so important that many schools offer 3-4 courses in typography alone during a student’s tenure. You will study this in depth during those courses, but in summary, the following qualities of typography should be considered during critique.

Font or typeface choice. The font should align with the messaging intention. In one context, a blackletter typeface will be fully appropriate, while in another, a clean sans serif is the best option. There is never only one font appropriate for an intended message (despite what Paul Rand might have told you), but the qualities of the chosen font should speak to the audience. This usually means that fonts should be mixed and matched sparingly. Consider pairings, and whether they work well together or not. Are there too many fonts, or too many weights? Does it need more variety, or better hierarchy?

Placement. Does the type play well with other visual elements? Is it clear that the designer thought hard about placement, or it is simply slapped on the page? Is it necessary at all?

Refinement, such as leading, kerning, and rag. Did the designer use the default settings for leading and kerning, or did they really dial it in? Does any paragraph copy have a pleasing rag on the edge, versus uncomfortable word breaks or strange line length with annoying rivers? Keep in mind that these observations should be reserved for the final critique before something is due. Don't go after a designer for a bad rag on day one, when concepts are still not even nailed down. This is a practice for the last 10% of a project.

Hierarchy

The relative visual scale between compositional elements affects the order in which we perceive those elements. Hierarchy can be tweaked using size, color, layer order, or repetition. Generally speaking, a red element will rise to the top of the order, when contrasted with less vibrant colors. It can even overcome something larger in size that is a lighter tint of color.

One of the worst things we see in compositions is a lack of hierarchy all together. When this happens, the eye just doesn't know where to travel, or what to look at.

We feel restless and unsettled, or we just miss things. In your critique, consider the order in which elements are perceived, and if hierarchy is strong or weak. Does its strength align with its intention and messaging? Think about scale, proportion, weight, and color.

Composition (and navigation?)

All of the aforementioned qualities if a work of design adds up to Composition, which can be defined as the arrangement of elements within a plane or space. While line, shape, color, hierarchy, imagery, and typography all create a composition, we can also consider the composition as a whole. The arrangement of elements can create movement and rhythm. It can cause the eye to move nicely through a space, or to shoot outside the frame, or some get confused and jump all over erratically. The composition is literally the big picture; the sum of all the parts.

Media and Material

In school work, you are often given a set size or medium for a composition. But when you have a choice, it's important to consider how the material can affect our impression of a design.

Consider a poster, printed on high gloss paper, reflecting the light in the room that it is hung in. Now contrast this with a hand held, 5x7 piece, printed on thick cotton stock, and printed using a letterpress. The

two pieces could conceivably use the same fonts, the same colors, the same levels of hierarchy. But our impression of these two pieces will be vastly different, based on the media and material.

Often, when a student is presenting in-process work, it's hard to understand how the final material and delivery will affect the outcome. But it's important to challenge each other to insure that this has been considered, and that there is a plan in place. Simply printing on the default paper offered in the computer lab is rarely the correct choice. A lack of consideration in school will set habits for a lack of consideration in the career.

There may be times when it's valid to consider whether the chosen medium or delivery for a piece is effective. For instance, a poster has a very specific way of being read and experienced. There is a set distance that a viewer must be in order to read the text, or to catch the full message. Perhaps this distance or location for viewing isn't correct for the messaging intended. Maybe the audience member rarely goes to locations where posters are hung at all, and would never receive the message. Would a different medium (a book, or a video, or an installation) be more effective? Raise these questions early in the process of design, so as not to frustrate the designer by questioning their whole concept once it is too late to change.

Timing, Rhythm, Movement

Certain formal characteristics for a design or only valid for specific mediums. When working with time-based mediums, such as film or installation, it's important to consider the timing by which the audience experiences a design. In film or animation, timing can be adjusted by speeding up or slowing down movements or reveals—simple enough. But in three-dimensional space, we must consider the way people might move through a room. There are many options of course, so question whether someone moves in a way that differs from the designer's intent. What about speed, or height? What if the viewer is distracted upon entering? Offer up scenarios that challenge the expected notion, and insure that the designer has considered all their options.

Narrative and storytelling

All graphic design works send a message to the intended audience. The designer should have a message in mind, and an idea of how the audience will perceive and receive that message. However, each individual's interpretation of a message will vary based on their own experiences, history, culture, and even their mood at the moment of perception. Much of this is out of the control of the designer. Since we simply can't control every human, we must decide what level of open interpretation is acceptable to us, and embrace the uncertainty. You'll notice in class critique immediately that opinions and impressions differ, even among similar people (such as those in your class). There is a lack of absoluteness to interpretation, and it's OK. Defend your work, but don't get defensive.

Even so, it's important that the designer do their best to convey the message they are intending, to the most people, within the chosen audience. If you're creating a message aimed at 20-somethings, and your grandma doesn't understand it, that's none of your concern. But if the majority of your classmates don't understand it, then you definitely have a problem.

Connotation Versus Denotation

Denotation is what we can plainly see in a work of design (what the text says, what the photograph shows). Connotation is what we read into the work (what is implied, and what is interpreted by the viewer). These are really two levels of experience. Denotation is surface level, and is usually experienced extremely quickly—within the first second of viewing. Connotation is a deeper level of understanding. It can come to use as a “surprise and delight” feature when we suddenly get in on the joke. Or it could give us chills, or disturb us. Or, more likely, it will simply add depth to the experience of the work. Connotation is unavoidable; we will always add our own interpretation to a work. So if you, as the critic, observe that there is a connotation which is clearly unintended or off-message, point it out.

Subject Matter Versus Content

Subject matter is denotative in nature. It is literally what is represented, what is said. Content is connotative. Two pieces (or 20) may all contain the same elements. If an instructor assigns the class to use the same copy, set in the same typeface, and the same image, the class will come up with 20 different ways of composing these elements. The subject matter will be the same, but the content (how it is presented) will vary. Be clear when you are discussing a piece which of these terms you are referring to. Do you perceive an issue with the subject matter itself, or with the method in

which it is presented? Clarity of terms helps us to understand each other better.

Loaded Images

Certain images are so loaded with meaning and emotion that it is hard for us to get past them. Take, for instance, the image of the burning Buddhist monk protesting the Vietnam war. Seeing that image will arrest all other impressions, making meaning difficult to adjust. Sometimes we choose to use loaded images in an effort to capture our audiences attention, or to shock them into being present. But there are times when these all-consuming images cause us to miss out on anything else the designer has chosen to add. As the critic, consider if loaded images are used to the correct effect. Do they achieve the intended affect, or are they distracting or offensive? Your impression may be intensely personal, so be open to the ideas of your fellow critics.

Authority and Identity

In our inequitable society, and in today's culture of awareness, it is important to consider whether or not the identity of the designer affects our receiving of a message, and whether that affect is a benefit or if it is troublesome. For instance, if a designer has chosen to use images that resemble traditional Northwest Coast Native American linework, it is valid to question whether the personal identity of the designer makes such use authentic or if we are seeing an example of inappropriate appropriation.

Northwest Coast style artwork is considered sacred to its culture of origin, and the history of oppression from colonizers puts some work off limits for people who are not part of that history. This is but one example of many possible appropriative or ignorant uses of cultural references. It is the job of the critic to question this, and have a respectful discussion about the reference. These issues are rarely black and white. Ask yourself, does this designer have the authority or understanding required to use this reference?

In the same vein, work that deals with issues of identity (gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity, handicap, or other) can be difficult to discuss in the group setting. No one wants to be seen as ignorant, intolerant, or bigoted toward their fellow classmates. Sometimes we may feel as if we're “not allowed” to question a work, for fear of saying the wrong thing. We do, however, strive to create a culture of openness in our classrooms. It is possible to love the message, but to take issue with the form it has taken, or vice versa. Be clear as to what you are commenting on (“I accept your message as it relates to your own identity; however I think the visual language is off-base...”) in order to frame the discussion correctly. And always assume your critics are coming from a place of good faith, and aren't here to attack you as the designer.



Foregrounding and Message Hierarchy

When we begin a discussion around the messaging of a work, we often find a convenient starting point in a particular point the designer has brought to our attention through explicit emphasis. This is called foregrounding. Foregrounding can help the audience to understand what the main point of a work is, then allows them to explore further for nuance. If the designer is attempting to make more than one point in a single work, this technique makes things digestible. We can't see and absorb everything at once; give us direction so that we can take in messages one at a time.

If you, as the critic, sees multiple layers of messaging, but not clear hierarchy, you can suggest that the design bring one message to the fore through foregrounding. Ask the designer what is most important here? If the audience only has 2 seconds, and you want them to get just one thing, what would that takeaway be? And finally, if there are simply too many messages being thrown at

us at once, how can the designer eliminate some clutter to make things more clear?

Challenge the designer to describe the layers of meaning that they have created, and insure that the communication matches the objective. Including around 3 different layers of meaning can add complexity and interest to a design, causing the audience to interact more fully.

The Poetics of Meaning

Sometimes a message sinks in with an audience best if they have to work for it a tad. Slapping the audience across the face with a message can be a big turn off; allowing them to discover a message can really make it stick. This balance of being obvious and making them work is sometimes called the "poetics of meaning".

Messages that are obvious to most every observer are said to be transparent. Techniques for this might include straightforward language, big emphasis in hierarchy, or the avoidance of decoration to make it really clear. Conversely, an opaque message is one that we don't notice right away, but eventually, through engagement with the work, we discover. This is analogous to reading a newspaper article (gets to the point fast) versus reading a poem (requires lots of pondering).

We can't expect audiences to spend hours pondering our works; it's just too much to

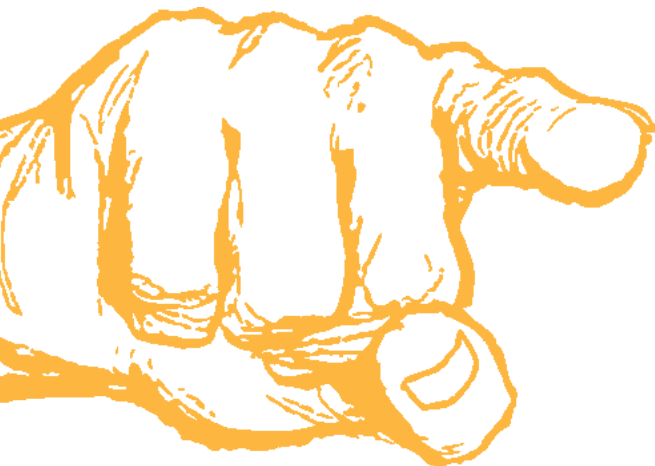
ask of them. But being overlay transparent can be boring. Find the right "poetic" balance to make sure audiences understand us, and also stick around for a minute. As a critic, ask if messaging has found this balance, or if it is tipping the scales of poetics too much in one direction.

Context of Presentation

Admittedly, the context of the classroom is rarely the intended end-use of any design. And yet, that is likely to be where it is critiqued and discussed. This might cause some issues in reading meaning, and could color the critic's view of a design.

When giving a presentation of your work, please let your critics know if there is any particular context that should be considered during discussion. It can be very helpful to create a mock-up that shows your design in its intended environment (the side of a building, painted on a road, tiny on a business card, etc). Take special account of scale. If we only see your logo design blown up huge on the projector, we might not be able to tell that it doesn't work at all as an avatar on Instagram.

As a critic, ask the designer how and where they see their design being used. Question the possibilities, and challenge them to consider new scenarios. Ask for clarification if you aren't sure how the designer sees their work in use.



How to cope

Receiving Criticism

While it may seem inevitable that we will take criticism of our work personally, resulting in some bruised feelings, it's actually entirely possible to have highly positive feedback experiences. The environment of the crit can seem daunting and intimidating, and you may at times feel nothing but rawness and vulnerability about your own work.

But vulnerability is a good thing! We must open ourselves and our work up to criticism in order to improve. If you came in as a freshman thinking your work was fine as it was, and there was no need to get better, then congrats, you can drop out of college. But for the rest of us who are seeking to be constantly better than we were yesterday, we've got to be prepared to get vulnerable.

Check Your Ego

The most important thing you need to do, right off the bat, is to release your ego. You've probably heard that designers have ego in abundance; it's one of our most common stereotypes. But the reality is much different. Ego is weakness. Ego is what stands in for talent. Ego can be damaged. Drop that ego at the door to the crit room, and you'll be able to open yourself to feedback.

Remember, always, that you are not your work! When your work is judged, please remember that you personally are not being judged. We all think you're great. Seek detachment from your designs. Keeping a certain amount of distance from the work (it's something your hands and mind created, something that came from you, but it is not part of you) will allow you to attain a level of objectiveness. You'll be able to say, "yes, this does kind of suck," when it really does suck. And you can still be proud when your work is judged to be awesome. Don't allow yourself to be brought down low on a personal level when you don't achieve instant success on any project. Every designer in the world fails sometimes (actually, often!). In fact, if you're not failing, you might not be taking enough risks.

Full Participation

Body language speaks about as many words as any design does. A critique requires full participation from everyone in the room. This means paying attention, putting your phone away, and closing your laptop. Turn your body toward the person who is speaking. Show the designer whose work is being reviewed that you are here for this, you are thinking and engaging in a way that they can see and appreciate. A clear disengaged posture, distraction from friends or electronics... these are things that will be reciprocated when you are being reviewed. Understand that the critique is a 2-way street. If you're not offering something up,

don't expect anyone else to offer their feedback to you.

That being said, we do recognize that some people are more talkative than others. Some students have no issues jumping right into critique, while others need time to warm up, feel the room out, or simply are extremely uncomfortable speaking in front of others. If you fall in this later group, the frank truth is that you'll need to live a bit more with discomfort than your more outgoing peers. The nature of the studio environment requires a certain degree of constructive interaction. Give yourself small goals to increase your comfort level, such as speaking up 2 times today, and 3 times next week. Things do get easier as you build relationships with your peers. And if social anxiety is something that is really gripping you in a medical sense, let your instructor know, and please talk with a specialist.

It's true that crits are sometimes very long. It can be a genuine challenge to remain "on"

for 2-3 hours. Instructors will usually offer breaks, but, puzzlingly, students rarely take advantage of them! Instead they sit at their seats and check the Snapchat, or just chat with each other. These activities don't do a great job of resting our brains, or waking us up. You are encouraged to get up, walk around, get a drink, or even run a lap around the building. Get your body moving so that your mind can follow.

Language of Crits

You've probably noticed that it can be hard to describe the way you're feeling about a piece of work. We might find ourselves falling back on opinion words: "I kind of like/don't like that". It's not that you aren't allowed to state plainly when you're into something; but that type of language isn't very helpful when a designer needs to understand the underlying issues in their work.

One real goal of critiques is to identify and understand the areas of a design that need improvement. This requires specificity. Go beyond statements of opinion, and justify why those opinions are valid. Use the language and criteria used in the chapters prior, about formal considerations and meaning. You will also find a list of terms at the end of this booklet that might help. It's fine to say that you like the use of Futura. But you must also explain that you like it because it has a bold and retro look that appeals to the intended audience, or that the size chosen has a nice softness about it that helps create a second layer of meaning.



One thing you'll hear a lot is, "this is working / not working". It's something of a cliché phrasing that we fall back on a lot in critique, and it's fine to use. But again, just as with "like", try to push farther, and explain WHY it's working.

Constructive Versus Prescriptive Language

Let's just get this out there. We are all designers. We all have ideas, and we've likely tried a lot of things out before we ever brought our in-process work to critique. We don't need you to design our work for us, from your seat, as the critic. Honestly, we know that's irritating as heck, and we've all had it done to us. Art directing from the stands is called using prescriptive language—telling someone what to do, rather than letting the designer design.

Constructive or descriptive language refrains from being bossy. Instead, it consists of describing a problem. It's saying, "I can see a lot of tension there on the left where the shapes are close to each other but not quite touching," versus "move that blue shape down 2 clicks". Your job as the critic is not to solve problems; that's a designer's job. Your task is to identify and describe the problem, and allow the designer to solve it themselves.

Now, sometimes it's almost impossible to resist, when a solution is just so obvious it's hitting you in the face. Maybe the designer hadn't printed their work full size yet until crit day, and they hadn't noticed the issue. The world won't end if you blurt out your idea. But even so, do your best to be constructive as much as possible.

Rorschach Reactions

Have you ever played the cloud game? Sitting on the ground, looking up to the sky, and pointing out shapes floating overhead. It can be fun and creative when you're on your own time. It's never fun nor creative in the critique setting. Really, is there anything worse than being told your design looks like something? You can never unsee it, and you'll end up having to change something that might have been perfectly fine, because now it bothers you to your core. Don't be that guy.

Active and Reactive Listening

We've talked a lot about what to say and how to behave when you're in the role of critic. Let's focus now on your responsibilities in the role of designer. The number one behavior trait you must exhibit is active listening—engaging with your critics, while being open minded about their feedback.

The opposite of active listening is reactive listening. That's where you spend your valuable crit time getting all defensive, and trying to justify every the decision you made, because you've already decided that you were right and your critics are wrong. This is defeatist and destructive to your practice. While yes, you know your design and your process best, you've got to speak to an audience. So listen to what they have to say.

Another version of reactive listening consists of simply absorbing everything the critics say, and mimicking exactly what they said to do. It takes all constructive feedback, and twists it into prescriptive feedback. This happens when you're very unsure of your designs, or lack confidence in your ability. You do what you think the critics or your instructor want you to do, rather than using your own design thinking skills to puzzle it out. This behavior keeps you open to following trends, being influenced too much by group-think, and generally finding the middle ground, which offends no one, but also appeals to no one.

Practice active listening by asking follow up questions, and challenging your critics to justify their comments. Ask why, how so, and how much. Take notes. It's ok to have a notepad up at the front of the room with you if that helps you keep track of the conversation. Or, write notes on your comp directly. You aren't just standing up there taking it; you're an active participant in the conversation. Be clear if there is something in particular that you want to have the critics discuss. Were you unsure about your font choice? Then ask directly if people feel the font is appropriate, or too heavy, or not heavy enough. You will get more out of your critique if you can direct the conversation towards those issues you've already identified, then allow the room to take its own path.

Coming Prepared

The number one rule of crit day is that it's not optional. We're not all here, hanging out, just in case you feel like you need a little help from us. You should consider your participation and preparedness for critique to be part of your final deliverable, and you will be graded as such. A student who turns in a stunning work at the end, but didn't bring a thing to crit day and offered little advice to others will not receive an A.

Come with work to show, and make it matter. Your instructor will know if you slacked off and then panic-designed something an



hour before class. Believe me, you can't fake that. Put a little work in every day, showing progress as you go along. Come to a second critique with work that shows that you considered and addressed the feedback given in the first critique. And do not ever say, "I didn't have time to do anything since we last talked". Wrong answer. Make your work ethic clear.

Often, the media you use to show your work (projector, printout, etc) will be up to you. Choose a method that most realistically shows your work, and addresses the issues you want to hear discussed. For instance, let's say you've been working on a logo. You're fairly far along, and you really need to have the details looked at. Projecting it large on the screen might be your best bet. But you've also got to see how it looks at different sizes. So in this case, you may want to also print it out at business card size, and pass several copies around the room. This would allow the critics to experience the logo as it is intended (in the palm of one's hand). The combination of both media shows that you considered the critique to be of vital importance, and you thought through the most important aspects of your design that needed a look.

It's quite common for students to show work on a projector, or printed 11x17 or smaller, and never see what their piece looks like full size until it's already turned in. This is very unwise! Remember that pro-

jectors work at low resolution, since they are screen-based, and small printouts don't accurately represent how a large format poster will look. Avoid getting a pixel surprise by tiling your work, or printing a small section at 100% for review.

Defending Your Work

Expect to be asked why you made certain decisions, and what you were trying to do. Have an answer and a reason, even if your reason is, "I was frustrated and just started cutting things up and moving them around randomly, and this felt good to me." Understand who your audience is, and what the goals are of the project, so that you can hold your work up to those measuring sticks.

Defending your work doesn't mean getting defensive. See the section on active listening if this is confusing to you. Defending your work is more about describing your process and explaining your reasoning, while allowing others to suggest new methods and new possibilities. If you're unable to talk about your work at all, it will be difficult for your critics to make suggestions. And it's good practice for interviews and client presentations, where these same questions of "why" will come up over and over! You may as well get comfortable today.

Framing Your Mind

You may be thinking to yourself about now that crits sound really hard, and much more

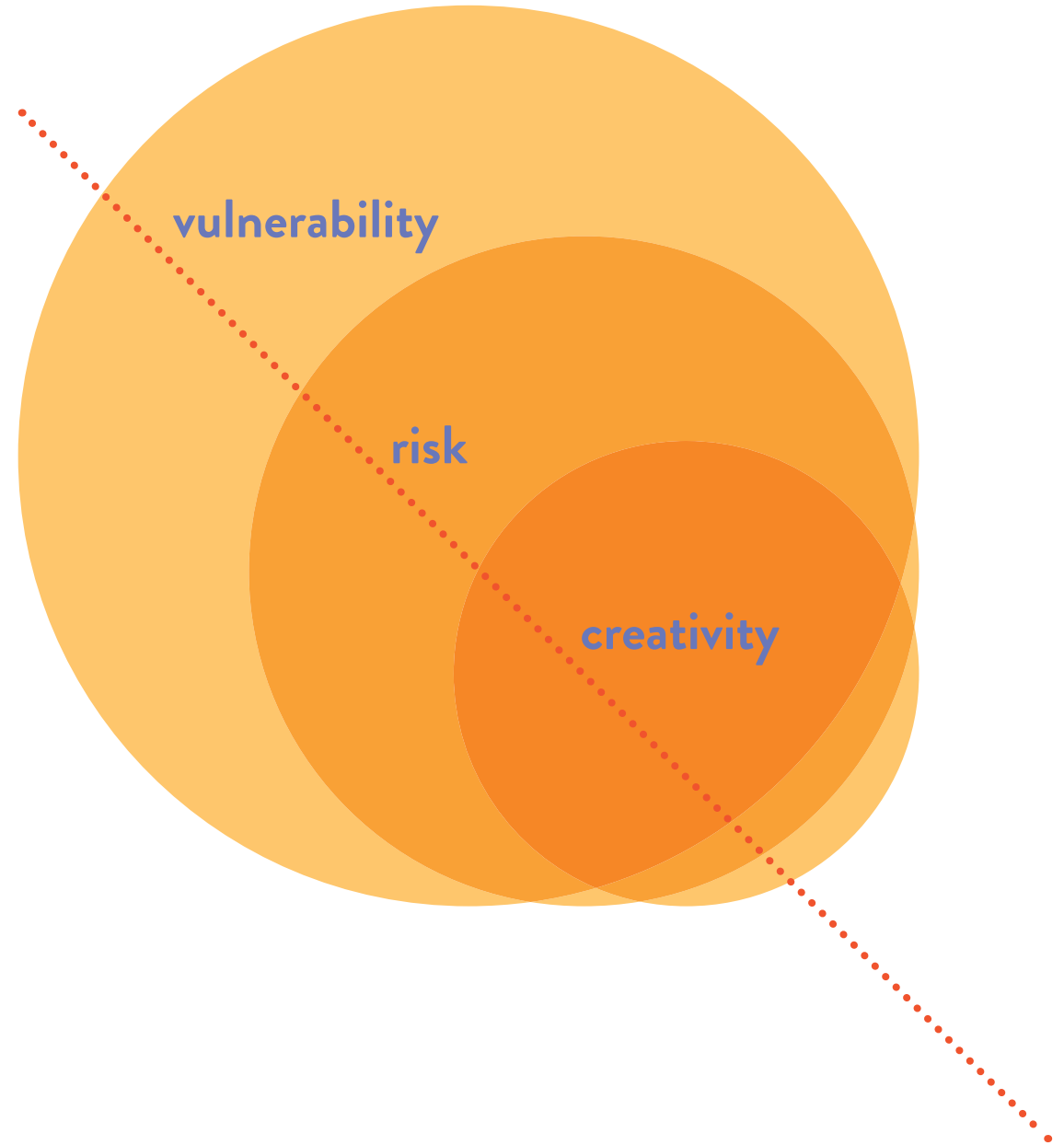
high-pressure than you had thought before. Good, you should be taking them seriously. Being a high-performer on crit days does in fact require setting your mind in the proper way for giving and receiving feedback.

It takes a high amount of energy to be "on" for 2-3 hours. Your brain will become fatigued. But you can help it along by checking all your other preoccupations at the door of the studio. Once again, put your phone away and shut your laptop. Don't be concerned with side conversations or what is due in your next class. It might help to do a quick review of the terms at the end of this booklet, to get your language straight. And of course, be open, open, open. Offer your feedback with a spirit of generosity, and assume your fellow students have the same positive intentions.



Wow.

You've consumed a lot of information in these pages, and you're likely to forget some of it. But please come back to this guide repeatedly. Refresh your memory of terms and ground rules, and reset your intention for self-improvement and giving to your peers. Remember that you're all in this together, and that when one succeeds, it's often because of the hang-up that comes from critique. Find vulnerability, empathy, and grace in your critique space, while always holding yourselves and your classmates to a high standard for design that is worthy of our program.



Speaking the same language

Brief

A written document that establishes the goals, objectives, audiences, and / or deliverables for a design project. The brief may be written by a client, by an instructor, or through conversation between designer and client. Documentation of the metrics that may be used to evaluate the success of a design project.

Color

The hue, tint, and saturation description of a visual chroma. Color can change a shape or line's level of perceived importance, and denote emotive qualities based on the viewer's perception and reaction to the hue.

Composition

The sum of the parts of a design. The overall arrangement of the elements of a design, which in aggregate have their own movement, rhythm, and connotation.

Concept

An abstract idea or intention, which underlies a design work and drives decision making. The general notion that is communicated either explicitly or implicitly, connected to something greater than or outside of the visual elements in a design.

Connotation

The underlying or hidden meanings in a design, which may vary by individual interpretation. The second level of interpretation.

Constructive Critique

Feedback that points to a specific struggle in a design, allowing the designer to find their own solution to the problem. It is not vague or opinion based, and it does not attempt to solve the problem.

Content

The connotative aspects of a design. The deeper meaning intended by the designer, and interpreted by the audience. The content can be reinterpreted based on the presentation and arrangement choices made by the designer.

May include narrative, word choice, interpretation, and transparency of meaning.

Critique

A formalized group action consisting of the consideration and evaluation of single designed works, usually in-process, with a goal of improving the final design. Often shortened to "crit"

Critic

A person with knowledge of a design project's objectives, who offers valuable insight to the project's creator, through thoughtful conversation and questioning.

Denotation

The literal interpretation of the design composition, including the words that are used and the content of the imagery. The first level of interpretation of a design.

Designer

A person who arranges items in a composition, using a combination of thinking skills (concept), making skills (craft), and audience knowledge. Projects usually originate from problem briefs, and have an intended outcome or communication objective.

Edge

The borders of a designed work, or the ending points of elements within a composition. Interaction with or between edges can create tension or ease, space or tightness.

Font

A specific size and weight of a typeface; all the letters of that same size, weight, and typeface. IE, Helvetica 10pt bold.

Foregrounding

Purposefully bringing one primary layer of meaning to the audience's attention. A method for creating hierarchy of messaging, in order to bring clarity to the message.

Formal Elements

The visual or sensory content of a design. Formal elements are combined to create a composition, and may include line, shape, image, color, and typography.

Hierarchy

The relative importance of objects in a composition. The visual scale between elements; the order in which they are perceived. Hierarchy can be effected by actual size, color, thickness, or weight.

Image

An abstract or representational object used in a composition; a representation of a physical or imaginary thing, external to the composition.

Kerning

The space between two letters in a line of type. Often adjusted methodically to achieve ideal visual spacing.

Kerning Table

The pre-programed space between any two letter pairs in a font. May be done very well, requiring little adjustment on the part of the designer, or may be done poorly, requiring the designer to adjust kerning letter by letter.

Layers of Meaning

Term used to describe the intended hierarchy of multiple messages, and to encourage the use of multiple messages to add complexity and interest to a piece. Multiple layers of meaning can make a design more engaging to the audience, as they discover those messages through interaction with the piece.

Line

The distance between two or more points, bridged by a connecting mark of finite width. May be real (drawn using a color) or implied (created by the eye).

Leading

The space between baselines of lines of type. Called “leading” because of the use of lead dividers when setting type by hand for letterpress.

Loaded Image

A shocking or arresting image that catches a viewer’s attention, and connotes something very intense to the audience. Sometimes used to draw comparisons or correlations in the mind of the audience.

Media

The material and / or method of delivery of a designed work. Examples include an app, presented digitally, on a platform, such as an iPhone or an Android. Or a poster, printed on glossy paper, of a certain size, hung in a certain place. The media effects the way a message is received.

Message Hierarchy

The creation of order between multiple messages in a composition. When multiple messages are conveyed in a single piece, the designer must serve them up in a clear order, to avoid confusion or misinterpretation.

Placement

The orientation of an object in the composition, especially relative to the other elements in the same composition, and to the edges of a composition.

Poetics of Meaning

The clarity or opacity of a message. How clearly or plainly a message is conveyed, and the balance of overtness versus subversiveness in message delivery.

Prescriptive Critique

Feedback that attempts to solve a problem through specific direction (“make it blue”) rather than describing the problem (“the color feels too bold, perhaps explore a different hue”). Sometimes a “hovering art director” is used to describe the giver of this type of feedback. It is generally unhelpful.

Rag

The line created by the eye at the end of a paragraph or block of type that is not justified. A shape that is created by the negative space around the ends of lines of type.

Resolution

The number of pixels per inch (or dots per inch, or lines) in a image. Should be consistent with standards for that image’s media. Traditional screens require 72 pixels per inch, while retina screens require 220 ppi. Most printed materials require 300 dpi. Not to be confused with the dimensions of an image, which is a different measurement.

Rhythm

As the eye moves through a design, it pauses and moves in a manner that is effected by the compositional arrangement and the hierarchy of the elements. This pattern of movement is called the rhythm.

River

In typography, a line created by the negative space between words on several lines of type. A visual distraction common when paragraphs are justified, creating uneven spacing between words.

Shape

Filled space between connected points; an outlined form in at least 2 dimensions.

Subject Matter

The denotative aspects of a design, such as what is literally represented. For instance, “a picture of an owl”, or “the words ‘buy now’”.

Typeface

A specific group of letters designed in a coherent manner to work together visually. Meant to be recognizable and legible (usually). Made up of all the characters (in all sizes and weights) in a family of type. IE, Helvetica.

Typography

The semantic markings of an agreed-upon language, used to represent sounds, and combined to represent concepts and words. May be rendered in unique, traditional, opaque, or transparent ways to add meaning or feelings based upon the viewer’s impression of the forms. Integral to graphic design. Distinct from “image”.



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