

MEDA 488-01 Capstone in Graphic Design I: Design Research

Catalog Description

Seniors in the graphic design program will plan and produce a project that demonstrates the culmination of their education and experience in the department. The project will meet rigorous professional and/or academic standards. Emphasis is on the planning, research and client relations required of the project. Instructor Consent required. Senior standing (90 or more completed credits) and must be a declared Graphic Design or General Media major. (2 cr)

Course Overview

The capstone sequence concludes the Graphic Design program and asks a question that earlier courses, with their structured projects, clear briefs, and instructor-imposed constraints, have not directly addressed: what do you want to do with your skills? After three years of learning to observe, make, argue, and think through design, the capstone asks students to identify something meaningful and respond to it through design. In some ways it is the simplest brief in the curriculum. In practice it is the most demanding.

Most students arrive at the capstone having been assigned their subjects for three years. They are skilled at working within constraints they did not choose. Choosing their own constraints — identifying what genuinely matters to them and framing it as a design challenge — requires a different kind of thinking. The subject selection at the start of semester one is the first and most consequential design decision of the year.

The first semester is devoted entirely to research. Students identify a passion subject — not a medium, a skill, or a material, but a topic in the world that compels genuine inquiry — and conduct sustained primary and secondary research before any design work begins. The form the project will take is not decided in advance. The subject determines the form, and the subject can only be understood through research.

Students who move through the research phase quickly, treating the first semester as a waiting period before design begins, tend to produce work in the second semester that is technically competent but conceptually thin. Students who engage seriously with their research — conducting interviews, following unexpected findings, allowing their subject to challenge and refine their initial assumptions — arrive in semester two with something meaningful to express.

Objectives

- Identify a subject of genuine personal significance and articulate why it matters — to the student, to a community, to a broader public
- Conduct original research using primary methods (surveys, interviews, field observation) and secondary methods (literature review, data analysis), selecting methods based on what the subject requires
- Synthesize quantitative and qualitative research findings into a coherent problem statement and design brief
- Begin translating research findings into an initial design direction, supported by evidence from the research process
- Develop and sustain a reflective practice: maintaining research documentation, process notes, and written reflection throughout the semester
- Engage critically and generously with peers' research and emerging design directions in ongoing critique and check-ins
- Present research findings and initial design decisions to the cohort in a clear, argued, and visually supported form

Required Materials

Storage media — back up constantly
Sketchbook (hardbound, dedicated to this course)
Drawing pencils, pens, micron pens
Any additional materials required by the specific project — determined as research develops

Recommended Textbooks

Design is Storytelling — Ellen Lupton
No fixed required texts. Reading and research materials are driven by each student's subject. Students are expected to locate, evaluate, and document their own sources as part of the research process. The instructor may assign shared readings on research methodology, design ethics, or relevant design precedents as the cohort's needs emerge.

Course Structure & Learning Outcomes

Course Structure

Students begin by identifying and proposing a passion subject — instructor approval required before research begins. The research phase constitutes the semester: surveys, interviews, field observation, secondary literature, and any additional methods the subject requires. No fixed timeline governs the transition from research to design. That transition happens when the research is sufficiently developed to support it. Most students begin the design phase in the latter weeks of the semester; some carry research into the beginning of semester two.

Ongoing critique and check-ins run throughout. There is no formal mid-semester review. The cohort moves through together; all work is individual. Process documentation is maintained throughout: research notes, interview transcripts or summaries, survey data, annotated sources, sketches, and written reflections.

Important Dates — Schedule

Week 1: Course introduction; subject brainstorm; passion subject identification begins
 Week 2: Subject proposals due; instructor approval required before research begins
 Week 3: Research plan due; primary research methods selected and justified
 Weeks 4–7: Primary research: interviews, surveys, field observation
 Week 8: Primary research documentation due; secondary research begins
 Weeks 9–11: Secondary research: literature review, data analysis, annotated sources
 Week 12: Synthesis document due; problem statement and emerging design brief
 Week 13: Initial design direction; first visual or formal exploration
 Week 14: Design direction critique with cohort
 Week 15: End-of-semester self-assessment and proposed grade due
 Senior Projects Day: April 23 — cohort presentation of research and emerging direction
 Finals Week: Final process documentation submitted

Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

- Construct primary packaging structures by Identify a subject of genuine personal significance and articulate why it matters — to you, to a community, to a broader public

- Conduct original primary research using methods appropriate to your subject: surveys, interviews, field observation, and other approaches selected based on what the subject requires
- Conduct secondary research using scholarly and professional sources: literature review, data analysis, and annotated bibliography
- Synthesize quantitative and qualitative research findings into a coherent problem statement and emerging design brief
- Make an evidence-based argument for a design direction: connecting research findings to formal and medium decisions
- Develop and sustain a reflective practice across the semester: maintaining research documentation, process notes, and written reflection throughout
- Engage critically and generously with peers' research and emerging design directions in ongoing critique and cohort check-ins
- Present research findings and initial design decisions to the cohort in a clear, argued, and visually supported form
- Evaluate the ethical dimensions of research involving communities, individuals, and lived experience

Graphic Design Learning Outcomes

This course supports the following Graphic Design Program Learning Outcomes:

1. **Visual communication proficiency**
 Demonstrate proficiency in visually communicating ideas and narratives through fundamental design principles, typography, color theory, and layout skills
2. **Audience-centered design**
 Produce effective visual communication solutions tailored to specific audiences and contexts, informed by an understanding of the human elements influencing design.
3. **Iterative design process**
 Demonstrate iterative design processes to solve visual communication problems creatively throughout the ideation process.
4. **Multi-faceted design approach**
 Demonstrate a multifaceted design approach that integrates design history, theory, and criticism through diverse viewpoints, recognizing design's societal and cultural implications.
5. **Professional tools & standards**
 Effectively employ appropriate tools and technologies to create and distribute visual messages in alignment with industry standards and practices

Policies

Attendance policy

Attendance is expected to learn the course material and will be taken daily. Please arrive on time and plan to stay, unless notified otherwise. Late arrival and leaving early will count as an absence. More than three absences will automatically lower the final grade. Studio time is built into our class meetings. This is an opportunity to obtain feedback during work process.

Assignment policy

Assignment sheets will be handed out for each project, describing the project parameters in detail and providing interim and final due dates. Pay attention to the constraints of the assignment, so that your time and effort are used effectively. Assignments may be resubmitted until accepted. Projects may be reworked for the final portfolio.

Conduct policy

A studio setting is conducive for an informal atmosphere, with student interaction an expected benefit. Please keep the focus on the task at hand too, and be respectful of your classmates and their work. Refrain from unrelated browsing or cell phone usage.

Communication policy

There are times when I'll need to reach the class for special announcements, due date changes, etc. It is required that you maintain and check your email. Changes will take place on Moodle.

Generative AI Prohibited Use

Generative AI tools are not permitted for any aspect of work in this class at any time. If you use these tools, your actions would be considered academically dishonest and a violation of Pacific's Code of Academic Conduct. [Adapted from Bryant University. <https://cte.bryant.edu/sample-syllabus-statements-regarding-ai-and-chat-gpt%E2%99%BC/>].

Attendance/General Notices

Students are expected to attend every class and to be on-time for class. If you miss more than 3 classes, you may reconsider taking this class until you have time. Missing 3 classes will result in a lower letter grade. Students who miss a lecture or studio session are expected to get notes, etc. from another student.

Critique attendance

Critique sessions are an important part of graphic design. Participation will be noted and applied to your grade. *Do not ever miss a critique!* You may continue to work on your projects following the critique.

Course information, assignments, grades and project details will be on Moodle.

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University Policies

MEDA 334
PackageDesign
Spring 2027
9:15 AM - 11:35 AM
Monday, Wednesday
4 credits

Moodle

We will use Moodle as the learning management system this semester. All materials, readings, design briefs, and due dates will be available. Additionally, digital copies of each project will be submitted on Moodle by the due date. NOTE: late assignments will not be accepted.

Academic Misconduct

Pacific University has no tolerance for academic misconduct/cheating. It is university policy that all acts of misconduct and dishonesty be reported to the Dean. Sanctions imposed for such misconduct may include "F" for the assignment, an "F" for the course, and suspension or dismissal from the university. Forms of academic misconduct include but are not limited to plagiarism, fabrication, cheating, tampering with grades, forging signatures, and using electronic information resources in violation of acceptable use policies.

Support Services for Students with Learning Differences

Pacific is committed to ensuring equitable access and success for all students with disabilities. The Office of Accessibility and Accommodations (OAA) located in Clark Hall Room 227, coordinates academic adaptations and services for students with disabilities. You can submit accommodation requests through the Student Accommodate portal (pacificu-accommodate.simplicity.com/). Accommodations are not implemented retroactively and students must request accommodations through OAA's Getting Started process as soon as possible. If you have, or believe to have a disability that qualifies for accommodations, please contact OAA at oaapacificu.edu or 503-352-2194 or visit our website OAA for more information.

The Center for Learning and Student Success (CLASS)

The Center for Learning and Student Success (CLASS), operated by the Pacific University Libraries, offers free peer tutoring to undergraduate, graduate, and professional program students. CLASS provides both individual and group tutoring. Tutoring is available online, and in-person at the Forest Grove and Hillsboro campuses (location is program-dependent). To make an appointment and learn more about how tutoring works, visit the CLASS webpage: pacificu.edu/CLASS.

Unauthorized Recordings

Students are prohibited from making audio and/or visual recordings of lectures or presentations without prior consent of the instructor or presenter.

Class Recordings and Student Privacy Protections
If the format of this class will involve the recording of "live" lectures, reviews, and discussion sections that will be posted for subsequent viewing by students or course instructors, these recordings are for educational purposes only and will be made available only to students enrolled in the course, those who have direct teaching responsibilities within the course, or administrators who may require access to ensure that the course runs smoothly.

To safeguard FERPA protections (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), any class recordings where an active student participant can be identified will be placed in a password protected location where only enrolled students, course instructors, and any persons with an educational role in the course have access (i.e. Box, Moodle). All efforts will be made to limit access to the recordings through limiting the option to download the recording. No distribution of material is acceptable without the written consent of the student(s) recorded, as this violates student privacy rights. This includes, but is not limited to, the downloading and distribution of material outside of those outlined above. Students likewise should respect their peers' privacy rights and refrain from distributing or making available any part of recorded sessions that records participation by students other than themselves.

Media Arts Department Door Access Policy

You are being provided with an access code to the exterior entrance (located on the south side of the building) and the four doors in the department's facilities (Walter Hall rooms B4, B7, B8, B10, and B11). For the time being, the same code is being used for all doors. This code is good until the last day of final exams in the current term.

Important dates

Aug 31: First Day of Class
Sept 7: Labor Day (no courses)
Sept 14: Last day to add/drop courses with no record
Oct 2: Fall Break (no courses)
Oct 5: Advising begins
Nov 6: Last day to withdraw course
Nov 11: Veteran's Day (no courses)
Nov 25-27 Thanksgiving Break
Dec 8: Last day of classes
Dec 15: Final 3:00 to 5:30 pm

Assessment & Grading Policies

Philosophy: Assessment as Reflection

Design learning is not linear. A finished piece is only one moment in a longer process of observation, iteration, failure, and growth — and a number cannot capture that. In this course, assessment tools exist to help you understand where you are and where you are going, not to rank or sort you.

Ungrading Approach

Point-based grades will not appear on individual assignments throughout the semester. Every milestone and deliverable receives detailed narrative feedback focused on learning, growth, and the development of research practice. You will track your own progress, complete regular reflections, and meet individually with the instructor.

At the end of the semester, you will write a self-assessment and propose your own grade. A conference follows where student and instructor discuss the proposal and reach consensus. The process documentation, research materials, and the full arc of the semester's work are the evidence.

Process milestones are evaluated as Complete or Incomplete:

Complete: genuine engagement with the requirement, evidence of real research and reflection, submitted on time.

Incomplete: missing, perfunctory, or submitted without meaningful development. Incomplete milestones require revision before the student can proceed.

Milestone Structure

- Subject proposal — submitted and approved before research begins
- Research plan — methods selected and justified based on subject requirements
- Primary research documentation — interview transcripts or summaries, survey data, observation notes
- Secondary research documentation — annotated sources, literature review
- Synthesis document — problem statement and emerging design brief
- Initial design direction — first visual or formal exploration grounded in research
- Process documentation — maintained throughout the semester in sketchbook and research notes
- End-of-semester self-assessment and proposed grade

Late Assignment policy

When you know in advance that a milestone cannot be met, notify the instructor within 48 hours of the due date. An agreed-upon extension of up to seven days may be set. Work submitted after the agreed date will not be accepted.

A Note on Independent Research

Research methodology is your responsibility to develop in relation to your subject. You will be introduced to relevant approaches through cohort discussions and shared readings, but the methods you use must be chosen because they are appropriate to what your subject requires — not because they are familiar or convenient. When you encounter a method you do not know: look it up, ask during office hours, or consult the research texts on the reading list. The ability to teach yourself is as important as any design skill developed in this program.

Scores

These scores are not your grade. They are a progress map — a starting point for reflection and conversation, not a verdict.

You may continue to develop any project for your final portfolio. Your portfolio grade is based on where the work ends up, not where it started.

Minor assignments and exercises are not graded. They are learning tools — low-stakes opportunities to practice, experiment, and receive feedback before higher-stakes project work.

Communication

Proactive communication is always valued over silence. Life happens — if something significant is going on, reach out before the deadline, not after. Extensions are handled case by case, at the instructor's discretion, and with the expectation of professional communication.