

THE SYMBOL GAME

A Visual Language Design Exercise



MEDA 116 — Graphic Design 1
Pacific University
Introduced: Autumn 2016
Presented: Ireland Game Play Conference, 2018
Tested with over 500 students across five institutions

Overview

The Symbol Game is an in-class design exercise created in autumn 2016 to teach students how to quickly develop symbols and iconography. This process helps build a foundation for visual language design.

The game addresses one of the most persistent challenges in introductory graphic design education: students' tendency to focus on illustration instead of abstraction. Through the use of time limits, peer feedback, and increasingly complex conceptual tasks, the exercise encourages students to develop symbolic thinking from the very first week of studio project work. Since its launch, the exercise has been used across five institutions and tested with over 500 students.

- Buena Vista University
- Peru State College
- Northwest Missouri State University
- Bradley University
- University of Nebraska Omaha
- Pacific University

The game was presented at the Ireland Game Play Conference in 2018.

Pedagogical Rationale

Visual language design relies on two rarely taught skills: simplifying ideas into clear visual forms and the discipline to create marks that are reproducible, consistent, and legible in various contexts.

Most beginning design students tend to see symbol-making as simply illustrating. They often draw what something looks like instead of creating a mark that conveys its meaning. The Symbol Game challenges this tendency by introducing constraints that prevent straightforward illustration.

- No color may be used
- Only shape and line
- No letters, words, or numbers
- One minute per round
- The symbol must be easily reproducible by hand

These constraints encourage students to focus on abstraction. The game also teaches a visual language system: the first effective symbol in a set sets the visual rules for all later symbols. Students must consider not just conveying one word but also creating a coherent, expandable system.

Student Outcome

"Students consistently report that the game helps them understand how to reduce and abstract ideas—one of the foundational skills of graphic design practice."

Game Structure and Materials

The game features three card decks, each corresponding to a higher level of conceptual difficulty, along with a fourth deck of gold star reward cards. The cards are printed on thick stock, roughly 4" × 4", with borders in different colors to signify their level.

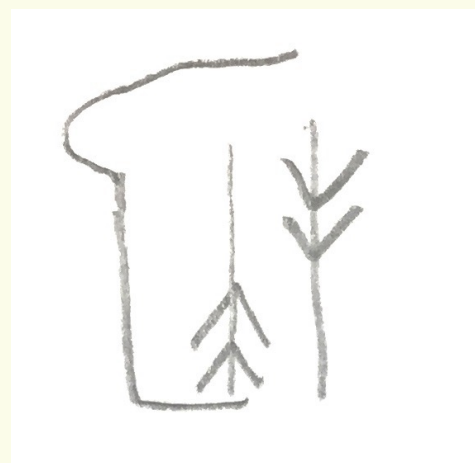


Level 1 — Concrete Nouns (Blue Deck)

Level 1 cards feature familiar, tangible objects and phenomena. Although many words are recognizable, some introduce design challenges that quickly show how apparent simplicity can conceal deeper conceptual complexity.

For instance, rivers and lakes are both bodies of water, but they convey different spatial and behavioral meanings. A river is flowing water contained within banks, while a lake is still water entirely encircled by land. How can a designer express stillness versus movement, and containment versus enclosure, using only lines and shapes—without directly depicting waves?

Level 1 examples include: chair, bread, river, lake, table, door, window, and other concrete nouns.



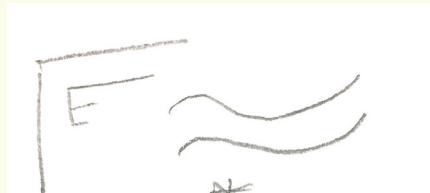
Bread: the word card alongside a student's symbol, combining a loaf silhouette with wheat stalks to convey both the object and its origin.

Level 2 — Complex and Compound Concepts (Red Deck)

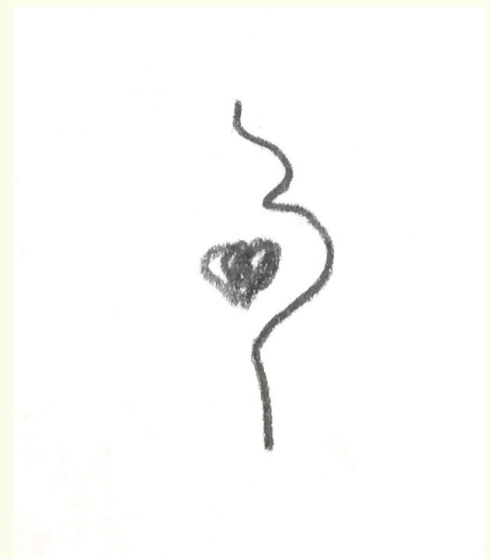
Level 2 cards introduce words that require more nuanced thinking and often build directly on the visual solutions established in Level 1. This level introduces the concept of compositional symbols — marks created by combining or modifying existing symbols to produce new meaning.

The air conditioner is a strong pedagogical example: it is a box that sits in a window and produces cold air. A student who has already established symbols for “snow” (cold) and “box” (container) can now combine them to represent an air conditioner — demonstrating how a visual language efficiently compounds meaning.

Level 2 also introduces relational complexity: how do you represent “mother” or “father”? A student might have symbols for “man” and “woman,” but parenthood requires conveying role and relationship. How is that layered into the mark without illustration?



Snow and air conditioner — a Level 2 compound example. The student's symbol for air conditioner (bottom right) references the established snow symbol (top right) and combines it with the idea of a containing structure.

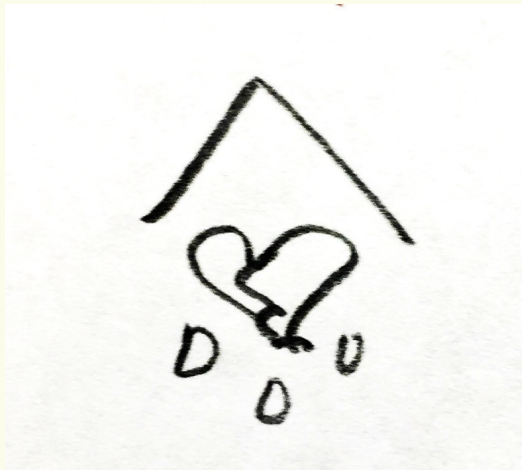


Level 3 — Emotions and Abstract States (Green Deck)

Level 3 poses the biggest challenge: emotions, feelings, and psychological states. These words lack physical referents, as no shape can represent anger, surprise, or homesickness. Students must rely on associations, conventions, and inference instead.

Listen has no visible form. Surprise involves an internal experience. Homesick blends longing with the idea of home — one student's solution included a rooftop symbol and a broken heart, along with tear drops/

Level 3 rounds often generate the most productive critique discussions, as the class must assess not only if a symbol communicates effectively but also if it does so consistently and unambiguously across various viewers.



Snow and air conditioner — a Level 2 compound example. The student's symbol for air conditioner (bottom right) references the established snow symbol (top right) and combines it with the idea of a containing structure



Level 3 green deck: listen, surprised, and angry — all emotional or sensory states requiring purely abstract solutions.

Game Rules

Materials Required

- Three level card decks (blue, red, green)
- Gold star reward cards (orange deck)
- Paper and pencil or pen for each student — no digital tools
- A timer (one minute per round)
- Wall space or surface for displaying work

Core Constraints

The following rules apply in all rounds and at all levels. They are stated explicitly at the start of every session:

The Four Rules of the Symbol Game

1. Shape and line only. No color may be used.
2. No letters, numbers, or words of any kind.
3. The symbol must be easy to replicate by hand. Complexity is a failure, not a virtue.
4. The symbol must represent the meaning, idea, or use of the word — not illustrate the object.

Session Structure

A standard session runs nine to twelve rounds across all three levels:

- Level 1: three to four rounds (warm-up; builds baseline vocabulary)
- Level 2: three to four rounds (compound concepts; builds on Level 1 solutions)
- Level 3: three to four rounds (emotions and abstract states; the highest challenge)

If time permits, additional rounds may continue within any level. The first successful symbol established in a session becomes the stylistic reference point for all subsequent symbols — consistency across the developing system is discussed explicitly.

Format: Individual Play

Individual play is recommended for small classes of ten or fewer students. Each student works independently throughout the game.

1. The instructor draws a card from the appropriate level deck and reads the word aloud.
2. Students are given verbal prompts about what to consider: the meaning of the word, how it is used, what distinguishes it from related concepts.
3. The timer is set for one minute. Students work independently, generating at least four to five possible symbol solutions on paper.
4. When the timer sounds, students have thirty seconds to select the single symbol they believe best represents the word.
5. All selected symbols are posted on the wall for simultaneous display.
6. The class discusses the solutions. The instructor leads critique: What communicates clearly? What is easily replicated? What risks ambiguity?
7. Each student votes for the symbol they believe best represents the word as a symbol — not as an illustration. Students may not vote for their own work.
8. The winning student receives a gold star card.

Format: Group Play

Group play is used for larger classes. Groups of three to five students are formed depending on class size.

1. The instructor draws a card and reads the word aloud, with verbal prompts.
2. Each student within the group works independently for one minute, generating at least four to five possible solutions.
3. At thirty seconds, each student selects their strongest symbol.
4. The group reviews all members' solutions and votes to select one symbol to represent the group. Students may not vote for their own symbol.
5. One symbol per group is posted on the wall.
6. Class critique and discussion follows. The instructor leads.
7. Groups vote for the symbol from another group that they believe best represents the word. Groups may not vote for their own submission.
8. The winning group receives a gold star card.

Winning

The student or group who accumulates the greatest number of gold star cards across all rounds is the winner of the session.



Facilitation and Critique

The instructor's role varies between rounds, alternating from prompter to critic. During the drawing phase, verbal prompts encourage student thinking: What does this word mean? How does it differ from a similar concept? What is its most important quality?

During critique, the discussion focuses on three criteria:

- Communicability — Does the symbol clearly represent the word to someone who did not draw it?
- Replicability — Can the symbol be drawn consistently by hand, without special skill or tools?
- Distinctiveness — Does the symbol remain legible and unambiguous alongside other symbols in the developing language?

The critique phase is when the most meaningful learning occurs. Students see the difference between what they aimed to convey and what their classmates actually understand. This gap — between sender and receiver — is the key challenge in all visual communication, and the game makes this clear in real time.

Observed Outcomes and Evidence

Over ten years of use across five institutions, several consistent outcomes have been observed:

- Students who complete the exercise demonstrate measurably stronger abstraction skills in subsequent symbol and icon projects.
- The time constraint disrupts the tendency toward over-illustration: students cannot render carefully in sixty seconds, which forces them to commit to the essential mark.
- Level progression matters. Students who move through all three levels in sequence develop a more complete understanding of how visual language compounds meaning.
- Group play generates richer critique than individual play in larger classes, as the group selection process introduces an intermediate layer of peer judgment before the whole-class vote.
- Students consistently describe the exercise as one that helps them “reduce and abstract ideas” — language that maps directly to the core competencies of the course.

The exercise was presented at the Ireland Game Play Conference in 2018, where it was recognized as a model for integrating game mechanics into design pedagogy. The combination of competitive structure, time constraints, peer critique, and progressive difficulty aligns well with established principles of game-based learning while remaining discipline-specific in its outcomes.

Connections to Course Learning Outcomes

The Symbol Game is introduced in MEDA 116, Graphic Design I, as an early studio exercise. It connects directly to the following course-level outcomes:

- Understanding the difference between illustration and symbolic communication
- Developing visual abstraction as a design skill
- Building a consistent visual system across multiple marks
- Practicing rapid ideation under time constraint
- Developing the ability to give and receive critique based on communicative clarity

The exercise also establishes habits of mind that carry forward into later coursework: the discipline of working within constraints, the practice of generating multiple solutions before selecting one, and the understanding that visual communication is always a transaction between a maker and a viewer.