

## Chapter 5: Proactive Thoughtstarters

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### **?** What to understand about this chapter:

- Thoughtstarters are ACTIVE ways to engage your creative process.
  - The environment you work in should nurture and support your creativity.
  - “Thumbnailing” is an immediate method for recording ideas.
  - Methods such as the Random Word technique and Montage help us break out of the confines of our own thinking.
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Divine intervention aside, waiting for an idea to arrive doesn't usually work in a deadline situation. And in graphic design, deadlines are inevitable. This is both a curse and a blessing for designers. On the one hand, there's the cliché of staring at a blank page, wondering and worrying while the clock ticks. On the other hand, deadlines have a way of getting the creative cylinders firing. The time factor becomes a call-to-action, and any methods that prime our mental engine to get started are a blessing.

To help set the creative tone, we have to consider the setting we work in. The vision we gain from life experiences...or the newspaper article we read...or our will to make a difference, are reflected in the objects around us, and become factors in the quality of work we produce. The input we provide ourselves will equal our output.

The fear of actually beginning a project is lessened when we know how to engage ourselves. Methods, or “thoughtstarters,” allow us to take an active role in our own creative process. The wall in front (that design problem) begins to crumble, and any anxiety, of what to do or where to go with our thinking, transforms into a positive experience.

Discussing environments and methods with professional graphic designers has a tinge of mechanization—we don't want to appear robotic in our creativity. But professionals do use thoughtstarter methods. It's just that they're used subconsciously. Ingrained through experience, they kick in automatically. Students who study design have the advantage of working off of the shoulders of professional designers. De-mystify and understanding relevant processes will not only enhance growth, but also help each person understand themselves better as thinking individuals.



5.1 Meaningful images spur thoughts that can add to a design project.

🌐 Quote: “I’ve never thought of myself as getting an idea. I always discover it.”  
—George Lois, Art Director

### A Creative Environment

Designers need to design the environment they work in. It helps in order for the seeds of ideas to thrive and grow. A comfortable space that is open and supportive, both physically and psychologically, is ideal. Look around your workspace—are you surrounded by meaningful images and objects? If so, even if only one photo, the relationship it has to what you're working on helps guide you. The people in your life, the trips you've taken, or experiences you've had, open up the world beyond the specific design assignment. Figure 5.1 is an environment that is a kind of controlled mess. Designers can't operate in a vacuum.



5.2 Books on the subject of design, reference material relating to design, and books outside the realm of design are important to have on the shelf in mixtures.

Not only is a friendly environment helpful but it relates to the inherent orderliness of graphic design. We bring structure to information by categorizing and reducing (a logo embodies the spirit of a company; an annual report compresses the financial summary of a corporation's year between a back and front cover). Yet, our creative process is anything but clean and minimal. We need as many messy and random influences as possible. When put to use, the disarray offers us the possibility of finding something we hadn't expected. Even books on a bookshelf (fig. 5.2) have the quality to mix and blend subjects and activities together. Each person's creative environment, whatever they make of it,

might take into account the aspect of organized messes that somehow have a rhyme and reason to them.



LL\_1\_Luba Lukova.

 Design Vignette: Luba Lukova

Luba Lukova (fig. 5.3) is a renowned artist and designer working in New York City. Her distinctive work utilizes metaphors, juxtaposition of symbols and economy of line and text to succinctly capture humanity's elemental themes. Lukova's began her career at the National Arts Academy in Sofia, Bulgaria, where she studied poster design, one of the academy's most intellectual and demanding specializations. She immigrated to the United States in 1991 and has since won many awards including the Grand Prix Savignac at the International Poster Salon, Paris; the Golden Pencil Award at the One Club, New York; and ICOGRADA Excellence Award. She is widely regarded for her *New York Times* Op-Ed illustrations and has received commissions from the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine, Adobe Systems, and Sony Music, and Harvard University. Lukova's work is exhibited around the world and is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Library of Congress, Washington, DC; and the Bibliotheque nationale de France.

**How do your ideas take form?**

I have to be really moved and interested in the project to put my brain to work. Everything begins with shapeless, almost chaotic, pictures that come to my mind. Then I learn as much as I can about the subject matter by reading and researching. And then I try to forget about all those facts I have absorbed and let my intuition lead me. I usually start making very loose drawings until a line or a shape suggests a more defined idea. I guess the process is similar to a sniffing dog following his nose. I think with experience we need less time to do preliminary drawings. Sometimes the idea just comes right from the very first time I sketch it.



SUDAN

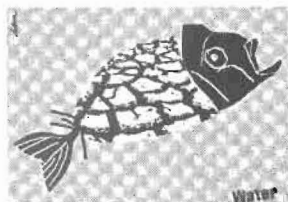
LL\_2\_Luba Lukova. *Sudan*.  
Poster for the International Anti-  
Poverty Law Center. 2000.

### Where did you get the idea for the Sudan poster (fig. 2)?

The idea came after watching a television documentary about that impoverished country. At the end of the film there was a commercial promoting low-calorie food. The contrast was so striking that while watching the ad I had the idea for the image in my head. In one hour I completed it without actually having been given an assignment for it.

### Where was it published?

I contacted *The New York Times* Op-Ed page art director who had encouraged me to propose images for the publication. Unfortunately, at that time the editor thought that “Sudan was not in the news” so the collaged drawing was not published in the paper. Another year passed before I received a phone call from a young graduate at Columbia Law School. She and a couple of her colleagues had started an organization called Anti-Poverty Law Center and needed a visual identity. While working with them I showed my rejected Sudan image and we decided to use it as a poster for the organization. Sudan has won numerous design awards including ICOGRADA Excellence Award and gold medal at the International Poster Biennial in Mexico.

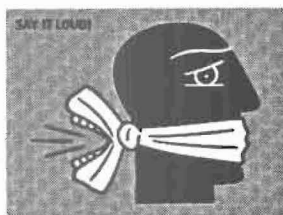


LL\_3\_Luba Lukova. *Water*.  
Poster for the Union Theological  
Seminary. 2002.

### When a client comes to you with something specific, where do you start?

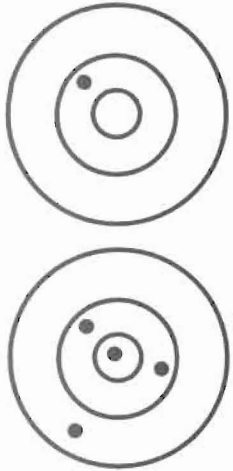
I start by immersing myself in the client’s project. After I accept the job it becomes my own project. I begin to care about the problems that the client wants to address, as if they were mine. Only then am I able to put myself in that state where I feel inspired to work and I am able to come up with ideas. I think this is what people need from us: to feel sympathy for their issues and use our skills to resolve them. I usually present to my clients several ideas. But there are exceptions where I feel so strongly about a concept that I don’t want to show anything else but this piece. This works well with people who trust me and know that I put a lot of effort into seemingly simple solutions (see figs 3 and 4).

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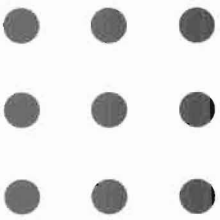


LL\_4\_Luba Lukova. *Say It Loud!*  
Poster/logo for Say It Loud!, an  
Orlando, Florida advertising  
agency. 2004.

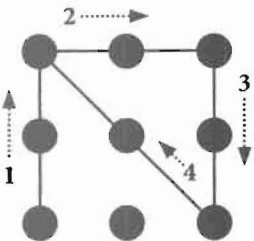




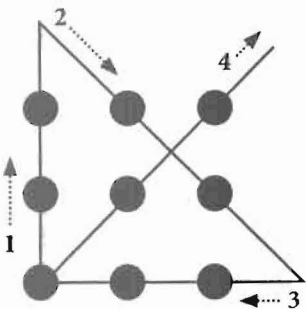
5.3 Multiple ideas have a greater chance of finding the center.



5.4 The standard way of thinking might result in this failed attempt.



5.5 The standard way of thinking might result in this failed attempt.



5.6 Going past the limits of the box allows for a full connection.

### Actively Generating Ideas

Part of being human is our ability to think creatively. It literally gets us through the day. We'll exercise our mental building blocks to make a sandwich out of leftovers or to get around a traffic jam. But when it comes to a design problem, we might think we are supposed to wait for that magical burst of ideas. In fact, solving problems, whether for everyday situations or graphic design, share the same techniques. Artists, scientists, and your next-door neighbor all share in a process that generates, evaluates, and strings creative sparks together toward finding ideas and solving problems.

The main consideration when developing ideas is to make decisions on what message needs to be emphasized. Focused points will come from on our research, but in the end, the designer will have to decide. If it's an event, ask the question: "Will this idea help fill the auditorium?"

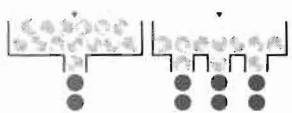
Keep pushing, and do not stop after the first idea. In graphic design, there's a desire, not to mention the deadline, to solve the problem and move to the production phase of the project—to actually start making the site, or poster, or logo. But the time spent thinking ideas through, challenging the first idea with others, and how each can convey a message, will lead to a much richer result. Multiple ideas are similar to "throws" at the dart board (fig. 5.3). Increased is the chance of finding the center of the target, or the strongest solution.

### Expanding Our Thinking

What happens when we run out of steam and the multiple ideas we were hoping to generate become an impossible task? Odd as it sounds, one way to get ideas flowing is to disrupt the usual way we project our thoughts toward a problem. The cliché "thinking outside of the box" is another way of saying it. The classic puzzle of connecting nine dots (fig. 5.4) visually explains the value of challenging one's own thinking. The instruction: to connect all the dots with only four straight lines without lifting your pencil off the page—an impossible task only if a limited way thinking is used. The solution is in realizing that a box wasn't really part of the problem. You must literally think outside of it (fig.

5.6) to make a full connection.

Graphic design projects begin with coordinates that are like the box—we set our imaginations within it. But when we alter the perspective, look at it cockeyed, or even approach it from an alternate universe, we tend to discover ideas in our own head that we didn't know were there.



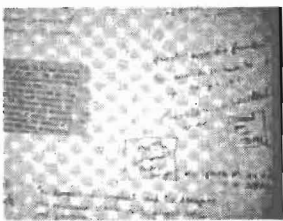
5.7 In 1974, the idea for a multiprocessor with access to the same memory sped up processing time.

💡 Ideas: Thinking outside of the box literally happened in the case of computers. The development of the multi processor eliminated the reliance on the speed of only one. Multiple processors worked in conjunction with each other, speeding processing time without the loss of data (fig. 5.7).

### Pencil (or Pen)-to-Paper

As we discussed in chapter 4, research is an invaluable part of approaching a design problem. Ideas begin to flow in the midst this early phase of a project. Once the research is done, we'll sleep on it and think about it in the shower, but at some point we need to record our ideas onto paper. This sketching, or “thumbnailing,” is invaluable in the design process because it not only helps move the creative process along, but expands one's thinking.

Thumbnails are, as implied by the name, small—each no bigger than the size of a business card. They are this small for the sheer fact that they can be quickly generated. While making thumbnails, we want to fill pages up with ideas. Notes and clippings can also add to the process (see fig. 5.8). Hand-eye coordination is helpful in sketching, but perfect drawings are not the point in thumbnailing. What is important is the thinking, and the recording of ideas. Anything and everything should go into the sketchbook pages, no matter whether you think the idea is silly or not.

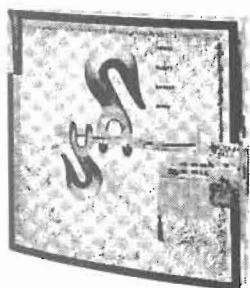


5.8 Sketches, clippings and notes all add to the thumbnailing phase of a project.

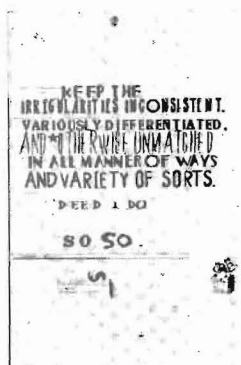
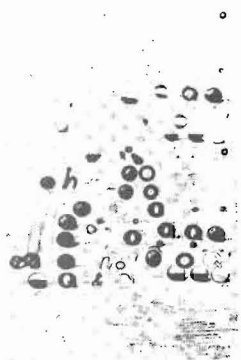
The cliché of sketching on the proverbial cocktail napkin or on the back of an envelope, during clients lunches or in airport lounges, really does happen—otherwise, ideas can be lost, evaporating into the stratosphere. A sketchbook becomes a better place to record thought and can keep ideas in chronological order as the project develops.



5.9 Words, sketches and photos all add to the thumbnailing phase of a project.



5.10 Scott Santoro. *Honest Beauty Gilbert Paper*. Final cover design of this paper promotion.



5.11 Ed Fella. Sketches serve as final art for the front and back of a flier announcing a presentation by the designer. 1994

Words, photos and color swatches can all be a part of sketchbooks. Tracing paper is also a useful material in the process because it allows for images to be easily traced over and combined with other sketches.

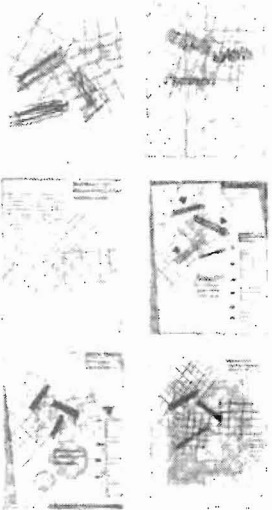
Promoting thumbnail sketches with pencil and paper in a digital world may sound as if the computer and its value is negated. But the truth is, sketching on a computer screen, even with a digital tablet and pen, simply isn't fast enough. Remember that thumbnail sketches aren't created for how they look. Their purpose is to represent many ideas quickly.

Figure 5.9 documents how sketches for a brochure about a paper manufacturer evolved into a main concept. Inside, an idea is notated: A found object (a hook for transporting paper rolls from the paper mill's floor) serves as an icon for describing the mill itself. Here, the characteristic tone and feel became the foundation for the brochure's concept—an honest presentation of the 100 year-old facility. The final cover (fig. 5.10) shows paper pulp stuck to the lid of a grinding machine, the factory in front of the river they used to generate power from, and even the duck pond that sits in front of their main offices (their intramural baseball team—the Gilbert “ducks”). The cover begged the question: Was the tough, gritty mill an ugly duckling or, as in the Hans Christian Anderson tale, a beautiful swan?

And thumbnail sketches for a flier are used as final art in a self-referential piece for graphic designer, Ed Fella (fig. 5.11). The flier discusses Fella's own presentation about his early, highly crafted, and professionally slick work—the idea is expressed through the metaphor of what the designer calls “the shiny boot.” The flier becomes a meta concept because it consciously stands outside of itself, both theorizing the value of keeping off-center (as a design approach), and exemplifying the idea by doing it.

### Analytic and Metaphoric Thumbnails

Essentially, thumbnails are shapes we create to convey ideas. They are used to guide our own thinking, helping us see how ideas connect with one another. They're also used when thinking on-the-fly with clients.

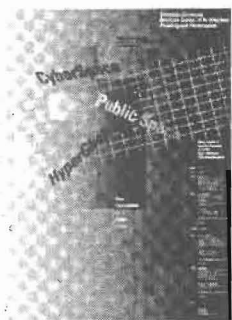


5.12 Willi Kunz. Thumbnail sketches for a Columbia University event. 1998.

A roughly drawn box is enough to read as the outer shape of a page. Smaller boxes inside are placeholders for photos, their inner shapes suggesting content. Squiggly, repeating, horizontal lines simulate the density and position of lines of type. The heavier the weight of the line, the bolder the typeface it represents.

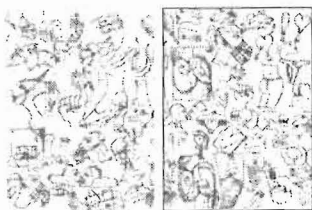
But even small thumbnails have different conceptual directions that we base our ideas on. Some are analytic-based, where the emphasis is on structure, typography, alignments, and analogies, to create meaning. Others are metaphoric-based, where images are combined to create meaning that is more emblematic.

The thumbnails for a Columbia architecture poster start to explain how the final design will use structure to create meaning (fig. 5.12). The poster's subject, a symposium about the transformation of traditional public space into cyberspace (and its deterioration into hyper-ghettos) is quite abstract. And the poster's graphic elements are equally abstract to deal with this subject. Yet, they do express a hyperactive, multi-layered quality that relates to the urban environment being discussed by a diverse set of panelists. The "roughing in" of type, lines and shapes aren't perfect drawings, but they do convey the visual depth the designer intended. Through a series of refinements, the thumbnails transform into a spirited poster in its final, printed form (fig. 5.13).



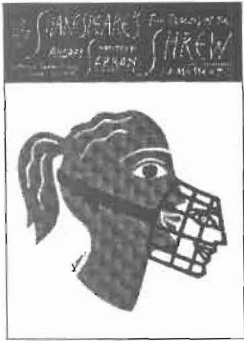
5.13 Willi Kunz. *New Concepts of Urban Space*, poster for Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. 1994.

Metaphoric-based thumbnails are used for projects that require a more deliberate interpretation. In this case, thumbnails blend a mixture of "readable" images to create meaningful communications. In the thumbnails for Luba Lukova's poster project, we can literally see her thought process. Embedded within each sketch (fig. 5.14) is a step closer in her investigation to explain Shakespeare's romantic comedy.



5.14 Luba Lukova. Thumbnail sketches for *The Taming of the Shrew*. 1998.

First performed in 1593, "The Taming of the Shrew" explores the issue of gender roles, stereotyping, and the economic and emotional relationships between men and women. Graphic devices such as masks and disguises serve to explain that men and women fall into socially accepted definitions of appropriate behavior. Each thumbnail sketch taps into the same devices to make mental connections to the subject, but they're explored more as visual symbols that can grab the attention of the viewer. In the final



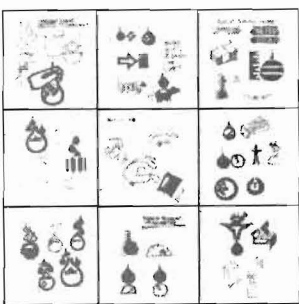
5.15 Luba Lukova. *The Taming of the Shrew*, poster for Columbia University's Theatre Arts Division. 1998.

poster (fig. 5.15), the image of a woman wearing a muzzle in the shape of a man's face, explains with poetry and power, the core concept of the play.

### Refreshing Our Vision

It was mentioned earlier that giving distance to research (to “sleep on it”) was a way to open our minds to additional influences. By creating distractions—just doing something else—we are in fact broadening our perspective. In effect, we're taking a vacation from the project and coming back to it refreshed. This is especially useful when you're feeling as if your bank of ideas is spent and you need to synthesize the information created at that point in the project. Keep in mind that the reason isn't to sidetrack you too far off the project—in fact, a notebook should be carried in order to “thumbnail” ideas as they occur, wherever you are.

Creative Distractions: Visit a museum, see a film, browse a library, read a design article, take a walk around the neighborhood, look for odd gadgets at a hardware store, go to an actual bookstore, draw/doodle, attend a concert or performance, listen to conversations at a convenience store, sit in the middle of a mall for an hour and just watch, observe kids in a playground.



5.16 Charles Goslin. Thumbnail sketch exploration (partial) toward developing a symbol for Merck & Co. blood drive.

**I** Ideas: Charles Goslin, a devoted teacher of graphic design at Pratt Institute since 1966, and at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) from 1974–1992, has had a love affair with the black and white image. Goslin's first job was for famed designer, Lester Beall, in 1954. He then operated as a solo designer for clients that include Abbott Laboratories, Price Waterhouse, Random House, and the New York Times. The sketches and final symbol for a blood drive (fig. 5.16 and 5.17) are an example of his use of contrast in both line (positive and negative areas) and metaphoric imagery (the many drops representing participation toward a goal).




5.17 Charles Goslin. The final symbol after a series of submissions and refinements.

*Goslin:* Visualizing ideas is the most important thing we do as graphic designers. Without an idea, you've said nothing. But it's not only expressing an idea, it's also making it a


graceful and beautiful idea. Here are a few suggestions I make to students when working on a design problem.

- 1) Apply the seat of your pants to a chair in a very quiet room.
- 2) Focus with undivided attention. There shouldn't be any distractions, especially music blasting through earphones.
- 3) Conceptualize, conceptualize, conceptualize. Students often say they made a design because they felt like it. They too rarely say they did it because they thought it through and wanted to use THIS concept.
- 4) Sketch out thumbnails with a thick black marker—a pencil or pen will make your drawings fussy. Fussy is good when refining an idea, but you can't refine “nothing.”
- 5) Ask yourself questions to help define the problem—you are your own best resource.
- 6) Push yourself to explore something new. There are wonderful things inside, and if you don't try things you've never done before, you will never find them. Keeping yourself off balance will help.
- 7) Enlarge some of your thumbnail sketches. There are times when a wonderful little fragment of a drawing is there, but you don't know it or see it. Do it mechanically—on a copier or scanner. The tools are there, so use them.
- 8) Don't be afraid to put stupid things down as ideas. The point is to keep moving forward—you can weed out bad ideas later.
- 9) Use symbols. Don't make pictures of whatever happened—there is rarely an idea in that approach. BUT, don't take the search for a symbol too literally by making a trademark.
- 10) Be your most severe critic. The only person you ought to be competing with is yourself. Push yourself in your sketch phase. Think of it as climbing a hill with a rock on your back—it seems like you are never going to get anywhere, but what you're actually doing is investing—in the project, and in yourself.

 Quote: “An idea is the hat rack to hang everything on.”

—Charles Goslin



 Excerpt/Article: (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, ch.5)

... Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

### **The Random Word**

The Random Word technique is a fun and effective way to generate new ideas. The process is to choose a word and then apply that word’s principle(s) to the subject you’re working with. The point is to expand your thinking by disrupting your thought patterns.

The way to begin is to 1) find a random word (from a novel, newspaper, magazine, etc.), 2) review its definition in order to understand its basic principle. Getting at the root, or stem of the word is especially useful (housing—house), 3) extract the principle behind it, and 4) apply that principle to your project.

Let’s try the word “hook.” Defined as a curved piece of metal or other hard substance for catching or suspending something, we can say that “holding” is its basic principle. Another word, “telephone” is defined as an apparatus for transmitting sound or speech, so we might say that one of the word’s principles is “communication to a distant point.”

Applying each principle to the context of a design project is a matter of connecting the dots as you see them. For example: 1) Hook > holding > holding pages > binding = maybe the booklet is bound with grommets instead of a staples? 2) Telephone > transmission > distance > foreground and background = what if perspective were used to bring contrast of big and small to the cover? This may or may not work, but either way, offers an approach to the project.

The process can also include random objects: a shoe, a can of soda, a magazine—anything seen or found have the potential for thoughtstarting the flow of ideas.

A random word scenario for a poster to help raise funds for the victims of





5.18 Laurie DeMartino. *The Hurricane Poster Project*. A design community initiative. 2006.

Hurricane Katrina (fig. 5.18) might have proceeded along as follows: After a few attempts at applying random words, the word “silhouette” stands out because it immediately starts to generate potential ideas. “Silhouette” is defined as “a profile, usually without facial expression, cut from paper.” Therefore, the principle of “human portraits” immediately begs the question, “What if a silhouette was brought to the poster as a way of explaining the tragedy from one person’s perspective?”

Creating a graphic image to represent the many people involved in the tragedy would be an excellent application of the silhouette. The image seems an ideal device. As it is explored through thumbnails, the addition of a tear in the eye of a young girl gets sketched. Refined further, the thumbnails reveal the possible contrast of a single tear to the devastating waters. An irony is found—massive amounts of water led to massive amounts of tears. The thought is powerful and intelligent, and the strong and direct layout of the final poster, with its use of type and color, completes this conceptual design. It’s valuable message communicates to others.

➔ Sidebar: The designer of The Hurricane Poster Project (Laurie DeMartino) was inspired by a Katrina survivor recalling his last moments with his wife as she was swept away by the floodwaters: “...I tried to pull her up, but was too weak. She looked into my eyes and said, ‘Hardy let go. Take care of the kids.’ If I could have done anything in my heart or my power to save her, I would have. I’m lost, that’s all I had.”—Hardy Jackson

### Montaged Images

Montage is a workhorse technique in graphic design. Its ability to encapsulate a thought makes it a valuable tool for designers, especially when creating thumbnail ideas.

Montage is often confused with “collage” because both involve pasting something together. But whereas collage is an additive process, montage is reductive. Images are chosen because of what they symbolize as ideas. And there are usually never more than two images being blended—the combination of three or more symbols tends to be

禾 (grain, hé)  
 + 火 (fire, huò)  
 秋 (autumn, qiū)

5.19 Chinese characters compound.



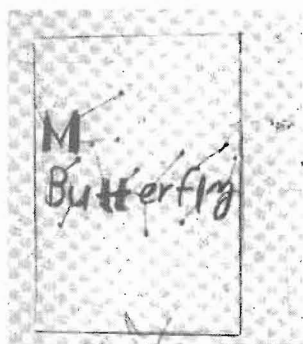
5.20 Alexander Gelman. Graphic for an article on the Moscow theatre hostage crisis. 2002.

confusing to the reader.

Chinese characters use montage to create meaning. Formed from a combination of single words, themselves signs and shapes, together create a third meaning (fig. 5.19). When we create thumbnail sketches, we are searching to visualize the same reductive, yet meaningful thinking.

The visual elements within thumbnails must work hard as symbols. They have to signify the content a designer is dealing with, make a connection to the audience it's communicating with. A good example (fig. 5.20) present two of the forms that symbolize the theatre (happy=comedy, sad=drama). The addition of a gas mask redirects the meaning toward a specific issue, in this case the 2002 Russian hostage crisis by Chechen militants. What's interesting about this design is that the final design looks as if the thumbnail idea translated directly from sketchpad to final. The refinement was in getting the gas mask to look like it belonged with the set. The idea, a simple association, produced a profound visual irony. As the article the design was attached to explained, a gas typically used for anesthesia was pumped into the theatre to neutralize the militants but also killed, through overdose, 129 of the hostages (mostly children).

A shared visual language is determined on the fly when thumbnailing. The designer has to objectively decide if the image will "read" in the culture that he/she is a part of. The happy and sad mask images read "theatre." If used alone, they would have been considered an empty cliché, stereotyped to the point of being trite. But their value in being part of the story helps a large a segment of the audience begin to understand. The addition of the gas mask brought the design beyond the cliché and created new meaning, and perhaps even a new information. If the design didn't strive to do this, any cleverness would have fallen as flat as a bad joke because nothing would have been revealed or conveyed about the subject.



5.21 Chang-Soo Choi. Thumbnail sketch of the basic montage idea for M Butterfly. 2007

The thumbnail for a bookcover for M Butterfly (fig. 5.21) uses montage as a technique, where pins that hold butterflies, instead hold letterforms. This simple switch underlies the story line of distorted relations between a French diplomat who falls in love

will become the raw material to work with. The list should reflect possible images to use. (Note: A word in the list that describes a “concept” will complicate the montage. For example, it would be difficult to exemplify the word “superego” with a single image. The word itself is a concept, making it too complicated to merge with another image.) Let the montage create its own complexity and depth.

6) Cross-reference list A with list B, thumbnailing images of each together as montages, recording each idea—a muscle with an engine, a burst with an engine—continuing down the list. It doesn’t matter how well the images are drawn. What’s more important is the thinking and visualizing.

7) When thumbnail sketches feel thorough enough, a review and refinement should take place. The goal is to find the best form that will support each idea you have.

Figure 5.24 shows how this project was fulfilled in a student-assigned project. A nostalgic image was found online and chosen because of read the best as a symbol of “gas pump.” The image of superman was scanned from an old book. Both were posterized to ease the integration of the two into one montage. The article was supplemented by the unique, superhero image.

This same process can apply to a montage idea for an event, a service, or product. The advantage of the montaging technique is in its ability to 1) draw attention by its odd combination, and 2) convey ideas in a surprising way.

### 💡 Ideas: Aesop’s Fables

The concept of pairing objects and ideas together is quite old. The ancient Greeks defined it with the word “synectikos” which means “to bring diverse elements together into a unified connection.” Aesop, a Greek slave and storyteller (620–560 BC) brought this idea to children’s fables. His personified animals solved problems and taught moral education, and especially popular ones include “The Crow and the Pitcher,” “The Scorpion and the Frog” and “The Tortoise and the Hare.” Printed in English by William Caxton (c.1422–1492), England’s first printer of books, they continue to be used by the



5.24 Adva Meirovitch. Student project for an op-ed titled “Supergas”. New York.



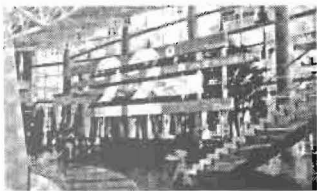
5.25 World War II Soviet propaganda poster using the “Sheep’s Clothing” fable to allude to Nazi Germany’s treachery in their invasion of the Soviet Union. The poster captions say: “The enemy is insidious, so be alert!”

Western world as metaphors for basic ideas. “The danger in disguise” as figure 5.25 shows, is an example of how one fable was used in Russian propaganda during World World II. Literally showing a wolf revealed under sheep’s clothing, the image includes a swastika on the Wolfe’s face to make certain who the wolfe was being likened to.

Quote: “All things are woven together and the common bond is sacred, and scarcely one thing is foreign to another, for they have been arranged together in their places and together make the same ordered Universe.” Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.), From his treatise, “Meditations.”

### Playful Accidents

Recognizing a design accident’s potential is valuable when developing ideas. To a client, flawless work is the plan, but designers know that the creative process can develop in a messy and chaotic manner. Figure 5.26 shows an unusual signage design. It almost looks like a mistake, yet the energy in something slightly off, or wrong, is what makes the piece so noticeable.



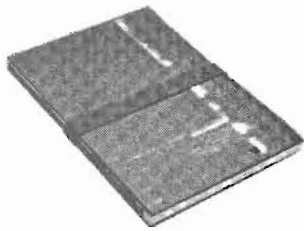
5.26 Pentagram Design, New York. Environmental signage for Bloomberg L.P. 2006.

Design accidents help alleviate formulaic approaches to our work. The glitches and mistakes move us into territories we wouldn’t have normally gone into. Color is an easy way to explain this concept. Imagine using the same set of familiar hues for everything we design. By mistake, a color not normally assigned is dropped into use. The brown image is now bright orange. A first response might be “Oh, no.” A second look however can elicit the response, “I never would have chosen that color, but I think I like it.” The color might, in fact, drive new ideas, just as random words discussed earlier might.



5.27 Oswald Cooper. Typographic flier announcing a new telephone number with tongue-in-cheek humor. 1916.

As designers, there’s an inherent desire for perfection. Typesetting alignments, grids and structure prime us for this attitude. But as the famous Chicago type designer, Oswald Cooper, once wrote, “sleek perfection palls on the imperfect persons who buy and use type.” This was, in fact, Cooper’s metaphor for life. His self-deprecating humor and hand-drawn type forms reflected a celebration of imperfection (fig. 5.27).



5.28 Giorgio Baravalle. Cover and book design for “Forgotten War”. 2006.

Human error can be seen as taking a step in a new direction—one not conceived of before because it was never imagined. America’s inventions are studded with examples. Charles Goodyear (1800–1860) spent years of research trying to find ways of giving rubber strength and elasticity. But it was only when sulfur spilled accidentally into rubber that was heating on his stove that the solution was found. Post-it® Notes inventor, Art Fry (born 1931) found that a glue deemed “not sticky enough” worked as a hymnal bookmark. After being inundated with requests from co-workers for more of that sticky notepaper Fry turned a mistake into a significant office-supply comparable to the paperclip.

The book design for “Forgotten War” (fig. 5.28) conveys the raw quality one might find through an accident. Its corrugated cardboard and rubber band binding seem inspired by the way the manuscript itself might have arrived—with text and images sandwiched between. But the unique use of materials for this book make perfect sense within the context of the subject—the photographic journal documenting the work of Doctors Without Borders. The book, like the organization, is produced through limited means. The emergency aid that is documented is conveyed more powerfully with a kind of torn-off immediacy rather than fussy jackets and printing techniques.

Positive, yet unexpected accidents can happen if your design process is set up for them to occur. Bringing your own language to the process is a start. Simple begin by asking the question “What if...” Be willing to take a dramatically alternate view of your project—come at it from a different angle. Make unusual comparisons, even reverse the order of what you’re working with. For example, bring asymmetry to something normally symmetrical; use only a visual to solve a typographic problem—or use only type to solve something you would normally solve with an image. Notice your reaction during this process and capture some of the inventive directions in your sketches.

🔍 lists/categories: Other ways to flesh out possible directions during the thumbnail sketch phase of a design project can be done by simply asking the following questions to yourself: 1) Bring a humorous approach to the problem by asking: “Wouldn’t it be

funny if....” See if any possible ideas are there. 2) Find ironic aspects of the project or subject. “Isn’t it odd that on-the-one-hand...and on the other it’s....” 3) Develop symbols that reduce the subject into iconographic-like interpretations. “If the communication I want to make were a badge, what would it look like...what icons would it hold?” 4) Create shocking or surreal associations with the project’s subject. “How can this be interpreted so that it grabs attention?” 5) Defying logic through illusion or the manipulation of perception. “Can the manipulation of how someone might perceive this design be a way to bring a unique quality to the project?”

### **Evaluation**

When a comfortable amount of sketches have been created, it is inevitable that choices be made in order to expedite the process. Present the work to different people with varied perspectives will tell you which design ideas are connecting. The evaluation process also trims down designs that have the most potential to refine further.

Access the research done for the project. Which directions hit on the most aspects of the problem needing to be solved? Weighing, categorizing, and identifying each against the other will ensure a complete and thoughtful design exploration.

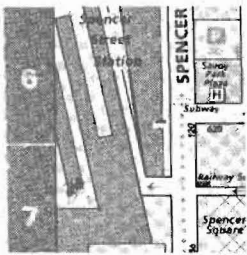


#### **Excerpt/Article: *A Psychological Tip***

Whenever you’re called on to make up your mind,  
and you’re hampered by not having any,  
the best way to solve the dilemma you’ll find,  
is simply by spinning a penny.

No—not so that chance shall decide the affair  
while you’re passively standing there moping,  
but the moment the penny is up in the air,  
you suddenly know what you’re hoping.

—Piet Hein (1905–1996): Danish, mathematician, inventor, author, and poet.



5.29 Detail of printed ant.

📌 Connections: Stephen Banham, Designer, Founder of Letterbox, Melbourne, Australia

### The Character of Accidents

During the printing of a popular Melbourne street map, a solitary ant accidentally wandered onto the black printing plate of a first page detail of the central city. Literally embedded, its image was printed on 20,000 copies of that edition, creating a surreal image of a giant mutant insect menacing what is now Southern Cross Railway Station (Fig. 5.29). What is so appealing about this story is how the ant brings a welcome organic element to an otherwise abstracted depiction of geography.

Everyone knew of the “special edition” that year and the ant gained an almost folkloric status. This offered a way for the public to gain an immediate and accessible entry point to a broader design discussion—one that celebrates the role the “accident.” In effect, no matter how we may deceive ourselves in attaining technical perfection, there will always be the chaotically playful world that we operate within.