

## Grad Written Thesis—Writing Prompts

The following writing prompts—invented and reinvented over the years by Anne West, Jen Liese, and Emily Cornell du Houx—are the ones we’ve found most generative for students writing about and around their work in developing the graduate written thesis (they’re equally useful for developing statements and talks). Responses almost always yield a useful discovery, sometimes raw material, and occasionally texts that are nearly ready for print.

Read through the following prompts and choose those that spark your interest or seem particularly relevant. Allow yourself to write, list, or diagram freely—without regard for length or perfection—perhaps for a set amount of time. You can do this on your own or share what you write with a tutor or peer as a basis for discussion or development.

### Origin Point

Narrating the origin point of your interest in your thesis topic can provide your reader with a rich source of information or insight and inspire their own interest as well. An origin point story brings the reader in at the beginning, at the ground level, letting them share that spark moment with you.

Here’s the prompt:

1. Recall a significant experience, moment, idea, reading, or meeting that prompted you to explore the subject or situation of your thesis. It could be an experience that directly influenced your work, or it could be one that’s suggestive of its mood or motivation.
2. Write a short, detailed narrative of this experience that suggests what holds meaning for you as an artist or designer.

### Glossary

Exploring your unique vocabulary allows you to understand terms that are significant to your work more thoroughly and discover new connections.

1. List as many words or terms as you can that describe your thesis inquiry.
2. Choose one word to focus on. Write down your definitions and understandings of this term, possible synonyms, and any associations that come to mind.  
You can trade words with a partner or ask a tutor to focus on your chosen word alongside you. Then, share and compare.
3. Maybe it ends there, or maybe you continue to parse the nuances and find what seem to be the most descriptive, evocative, or accurate terms:
  - What words do you need to re/define? To alter, add, or omit?
  - What did you learn about your work through this exercise?
  - What was revealed that needs more exploration or explanation?

### **Interview**

Just talking to someone about your work can highlight helpful ideas and articulate them for others. (This exercise requires a partner.)

1. Compose five questions you would like to be asked about your thesis work. At the same time, ask a partner or tutor to write down five questions they have for you.
2. Ask your partner to act as an interviewer for an art or design magazine and conduct the interview, reading each question and asking follow-up questions as needed.
3. Record the interview and transcribe it as raw material for writing.

### **Finding Themes**

It's sometimes difficult to find connections among your works—or it might be hard to focus on a manageable set of themes. This activity can help with both. (This activity requires a partner.)

1. Collect a set of note cards each holding something you connect or relate to—things that speak to you, things that feel significant, things that stick in your mind. Specifically:
  - 5 visual sources (not of your work—other images)
  - 5 textual sources (books, movies, song lyrics, etc.)
  - 5 ephemeral moments (fleeting experiences, feelings, anecdotes, etc.)
  - 5 free choice

For each, write a sentence indicating why you picked this particular image/text/moment.

2. Present your cards, one at a time, to a partner or tutor. You don't need to describe what's there so much as why you included it.
3. Have your partner/tutor take notes as you speak, writing down particularly crisp or poetic phrases on one side of the page and big ideas/topics on the other side—clustering ideas and tracking recurrences and connections.
4. Discuss what you both noticed and the themes that emerged. You might return to the cards and start mapping them into these themes and connections.

### **Outlining a Thematic Table of Contents**

A series of 2-5 thematic chapters is among the most common structures for scholarly and monograph-style theses. Themes can be distinct (the body, the mind, the heart) or progress along a kind of spectrum (here/there, analog/digital, everyday/magic). Once thematic chapters are identified, each chapter becomes a container for the various contents (works, precedents, contextual research, etc.) that fall under them. Here's a brainstorming and sorting process for determining themes and distribution of contents among the themes. If themes are already determined (perhaps using the prompt above), use them in step 1.

1. Brainstorm themes/topics/subjects in and around your work and research; write each one on a post-it (all the same color).
2. List "contents" (works, processes, precedents, personal anecdotes, and contextual research)—each on its own post-it (different colors for each category of content).
3. Place the theme post-its in a row across a wall/table. Place the contents post-its under

various themes, moving them around, trying different arrangements, seeing where they “stick.” As you sort, consider:

- Which themes are gathering the most contents? Are some lacking contents? Could any be combined?
- If a theme is lacking contents, is it unimportant after all, or is it calling out for more precedents, contextual research, etc.?
- Are any contents unplaceable? Do they suggest new themes/chapters? Are they best placed aside for now?
- How might you order the themes/chapters? Move parts around and consider how each leads into/prepares the reader for the next.
- How might you order the contents within each chapter? Move parts around and consider how each leads into/prepares the reader for the next (hint: it’s often helpful to start with contextual research).

### **Diagramming Process**

While it may seem obvious or routine to you, how you make things, your process, is unique and interesting to others, especially if you consider process holistically—from carving to reading to taking walks. (This exercise requires a partner.)

1. Draw a diagram to show what your working process looks like. You can think holistically about your practice or just about the making of a single piece.
2. Now, share it with a partner or tutor, describing your process, step by step, to the other person. Your partner is free to ask follow up questions.
3. Consider larger questions like: What shape does the diagram take: a straight line or a wandering path? A repeating cycle or a constant movement forward? Which aspects of your process come with ease? Which could you never do without effort?
4. Ask the partner or tutor to identify the most compelling, surprising, or curious aspect of your process and free write about that part of the process. Think about both what you do and why it matters or what it means.

### **Precedents**

Most thesis books include some discussion of influential artists and designers, which helps contextualize the thesis writer’s work within the history of the field.

1. Brainstorm artists and designers whose work inspired or relates to yours. You might start by combing through sketchbooks and critique notes, returning to all those “artists you should look at.”
2. Develop a thoughtful selection of precedents by exploring connections—not only formal (the most obvious) but also around shared technique, philosophy, subject interest, or personal experience. Some ideas for how:
  - Draw a literal family tree, with you as the trunk and various artists/designers collected on primary and secondary branches, even on leaves.
  - Imagine a roundtable of your greatest influences: What would they say about your work?

### Textual Sources

Most artists and designers' work is informed by or speaks to particular social, cultural, political, psychological, scientific, environmental, philosophical, or historical topics. Your thesis is an opportunity to become an expert on such topics—to extensively research and articulate what may be only implicitly referenced in your work—and to document and share that expertise. You might include your research in a scholarly (integrated and cited) style, you might intersperse quotes throughout your text, and you might include an annotated bibliography. Sometimes the easiest way to engage in this kind of scholarly conversation is to actually have a conversation.

1. Pick a “text”—another artist’s work, a political issue, a philosophical idea, a novel—that in some way inspires or echoes your interests and work.
2. For five minutes, write or talk about this text, or source material. Three choices:
  - Describe it as you would to a friend over dinner. “I’ve been reading this book ...”
  - Answer methodically: Who, what, when, where, why?
  - Summarize, evaluate, and connect to your work (like an annotated bibliography entry).

### Audience/Reception

Art and design are subjective and audiences will interpret them in many unpredictable ways. Still, you can suggest readings and meanings, giving subtle prompts to potential interpretations.

1. List or freewrite on the following questions:
  - What do you want your work to do for your audience, viewer, user?
  - How do you want them to experience it, sensorially, intellectually, or emotionally?
2. When working with a tutor or partner, have them write simultaneously, recording their response to what you’re sharing (images, text, etc.). Then compare.

### Project Descriptions

Your thesis book is a showcase for your work. In addition to illustrating your design and art in images, you will want to describe it in words—translating from a visual to verbal language to help your readers/viewers “see” what they otherwise might not, both literally and conceptually. A project description describes and interprets, making connections between form and meaning. Project descriptions also have a long post-thesis afterlife; you can use them (or variations of them) in presenting your work on your website and to galleries, grant-makers, clients, etc.

The following questions can help draw out both description and interpretation. It is not a checklist; some answers will rise to the top, and the final text will selectively integrate responses.

Answering these questions can lead to important discoveries for yourself, too.

- What is the work’s title?
- What does the piece/project/series look like? Describe its key formal features.
- What materials are you using and what qualities do they possess?
- How is it made— the technique or process you used?
- What was your inspiration for this project?
- What is its context (art historical, historical, political, etc.)?
- What subject(s) or concept(s) are you exploring?
- How have you transformed the concept(s) or context?
- What meaning/significance does this piece suggest?
- How does the viewer/user experience it?