

DESIGN X-TRAINING

Strengthen your design skills with this challenging and fun summer-long creativity workout.

Words David & Mary Sherwin / **Art** Melissa McFeeters

The most important decision I made in my design career was joining the high school track team. Or attending the first practice of the year, to be specific. I'd been running long distances for exercise over the summer, but no matter how much mileage I put on, I wasn't getting any faster.

What happened during that first practice? We did cross-training. We stretched. Then we ran a warmup mile. Then a timed mile. Then intervals. Then weights. A brief jog to cool down. Then more stretching.

Was the training hard? Yes. Did I get faster in the following weeks? Absolutely. The work I did off the track made me stronger and faster once I laced up my shoes on the track. Cross-training taught me a different sort of discipline as a designer. You

can work on improving specific skills that come up as part of projects: Arranging elements in a page spread, crafting a compelling identity or icon, laying out a responsive website, or animating graphics for a video. But your biggest gains will come from design cross-training—moving through a variety of different design exercises that help you build and extend your skills.

In the following pages, you'll find 10 exercises that I created with the help of Mary Paynter Sherwin to help you improve your creative fitness. Try to complete them within the provided time limits and constraints. After a few days, come back and revisit each exercise to build on your solution or cross-train. Let's get started!

— David



1: DIY TYPE

Time limit: 60 minutes

You probably know a designer with a typeface obsession. You may be that designer, scrolling endlessly through well-made typefaces online and finding the thinnest of excuses to use one in a project. If you can't find the typeface you need, you can always make it yourself. But what if you were asked to craft a custom typeface, and were limited to just a few shapes to construct it?

You've been asked to create a typeface to help promote a conference for the Maker Movement, which is for do-it-yourself inventors, designers, makers, artists, hackers and tinkerers. Your client handed you a box of items and wants you to use their shapes as the basis for the typeface.

Take a look at the items here, and create a typeface whose letterforms are constructed solely from their shapes. You can use multiple items across any number of letterforms, but you can't have a single letterform made solely from multiples of one item.



BUILD ON THIS

Ask someone to fill a box with at least 12 random items and give it to you. Make a second typeface from the shapes of those items.

CROSS-TRAIN

Incorporate half of the letterforms from your first typeface with half from the second.

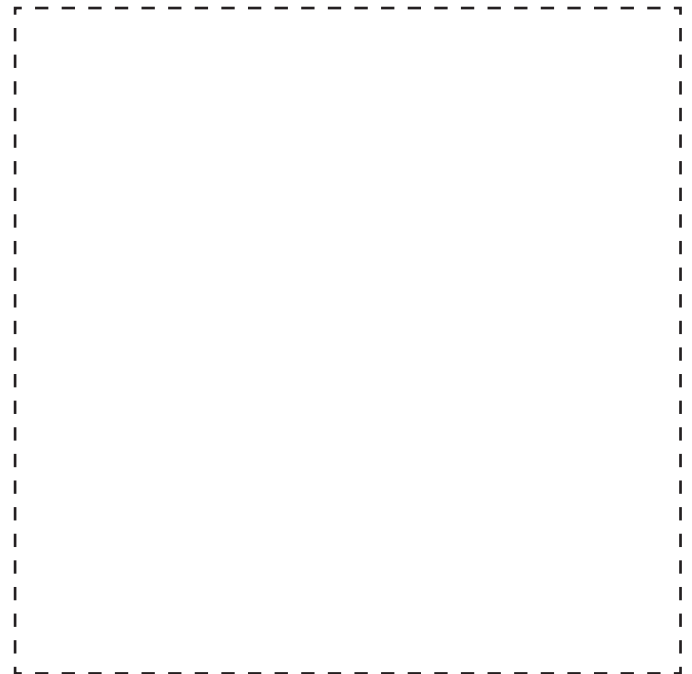
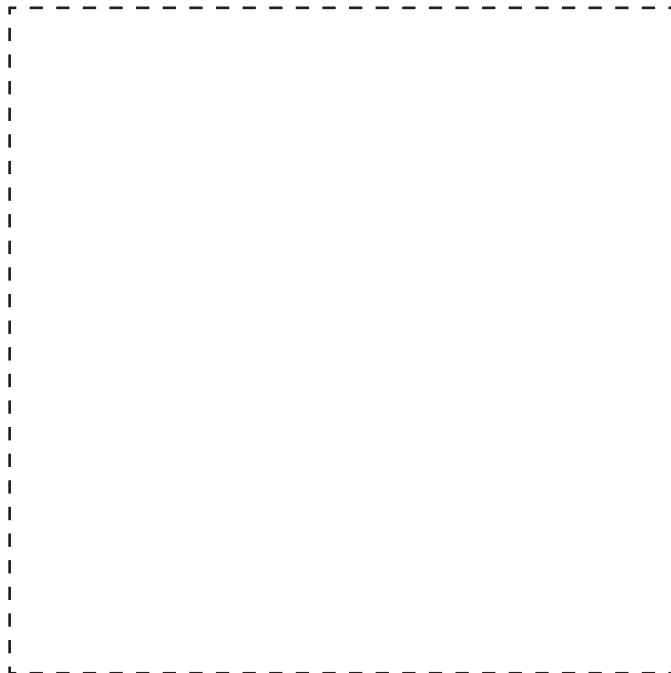
2: KID SOUNDS

Time limit: 60 minutes

Certain songs from our childhood immediately conjure powerful memories. When I hear songs from the late '80s, specific moments come to mind: pretending to be a superhero on the playground, or playing a scary game of flashlight tag at a sleepover.

What song did you love most when you were a child? Draw the album cover for that song from your perspective as a child. Don't look up the album artwork on the internet or listen to the song while you work. Create it from memory.

When you're done, go and listen to the song. Then draw the album art for that single again, only from your perspective now, as an adult.



BUILD ON THIS

Interview someone about their favorite song from his or her childhood and repeat the exercise.

CROSS-TRAIN

Sketch ideas for how your new album art could tie into on-stage visuals for display during a live performance.



3: TIME IN A BOTTLE

Time limit: 45 minutes

We live in a “right here, right now” kind of world, but designers are always asked to think about what to make for the future. It’s difficult to think about the potential impact of our work over a long period of time. It’s even more difficult to communicate that kind of impact to others. Here’s an exercise that will help you in developing this skill.

Draw 10 pictures of a bottle (any bottle shape is fine). In each bottle, draw one object. The bottles, when placed in sequence, should convey the passing of time. For example: an easy solution would be 10 apples, from ripe to rotten. Try to take this further: How much time will pass from your first bottle to your last? What will you show in the bottles? What impact can you convey? Challenge yourself to include multiple objects, rather than a single, repeated one.

BUILD ON THIS

Using 10 bottles, tell a familiar story through the objects in the bottles. Consider movies, books or even fairy tales when deciding on your source material.

CROSS-TRAIN

Using only the objects from Exercise 1 and 10 bottles, tell another story. You may repeat objects. Ask several people if they can guess your story from the bottles.

4: SIGN OF THE TIMES

Time limit: 60 minutes

Think of a local store in your neighborhood. You've been hired to come up with a hand-drawn "We're Open" sign for them to hang on the front door. However, they don't want just one sign. They want a unique sign for each hour that the store is open, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Create sketches for each sign. Your design should speak to the spirit of the store, and entice passersby to take a peek inside.



A series of seven dashed-line boxes for sketching signs, arranged in three rows: three boxes in the top row, three boxes in the middle row, and two boxes in the bottom row.

BUILD ON THIS

Phase 1: The store owner wants you to personalize the "We're Open" signs for each day of the week. Adapt your solution accordingly.

Phase 2: Business is booming! The store will now be open 24/7. What does this mean for your solution?

CROSS-TRAIN

The business loves your typeface from Exercise 1. Redo your signs incorporating this typeface.



5: FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

Time limit: 30 minutes

Pick one of the items from the following list, and imagine a world in which that thing does not exist. If you were designing the very first version of that thing that anyone had ever seen, what would it look like? Sketch at least 10 different ideas, and consider the following questions: How will you explain this thing to others? Who will use it? What will you call it?

Headphones	Pepper grinder	Picture frame	Pencil eraser
Toaster	Sunscreen	Chainsaw	Pillows
Water bottle	Masking tape	Flashlight	Swing set
Socks	Fork	Toothbrush	Doorbell

BUILD ON THIS

Phase 1: Come up with a magazine ad that encourages a group of people to use the object. When thinking of groups, consider unexpected or unusual uses for your new object.

Phase 2: Sketch out a series of virtual reality (VR) scenarios that would provide people with a safe place to practice using the new object.

CROSS-TRAIN

For one day, the store from Exercise 4 is going to sell only this single item. Redo the first set of hourly signs to incorporate this object and their ad campaign.

6: GARBAGE IN, AWESOME OUT

Time limit: 60 minutes

Recycling technology is becoming advanced—really advanced. I recently saw a trash can that could automatically separate items that needed to be recycled from those destined for a landfill. Next thing you know, that same trash can will be taking those same recycled materials and making something new from them right on the spot.

How would that work? Whatever you threw in the trash could be dirty, and whatever the trash can produced for you would need to be safe and clean. What would it take to convince people that items directly recycled from garbage can be awesome? Sounds like a problem for designers to solve.

Create a garbage can that, within a matter of minutes, also dispenses a single item produced from the garbage that was placed in it. (Sorry, that object can't be money.) What would it recycle? Where would it be located? Who would use it? Consider signage, instructions and curb appeal if it appears in public. Don't worry about how it could be done. Imagine the technology you need will be ready and available to you.



A large, empty rectangular area enclosed by a dashed black border, intended for a design sketch or drawing.

BUILD ON THIS

Despite the team's best efforts, the initial prototype failed. The new version works great, but the recycling process now takes 24 hours. Redesign the trash can to allow for the user to leave their garbage and return later to retrieve their object.

CROSS-TRAIN

Your garbage can can create only the object from Exercise 5. Redo the design.

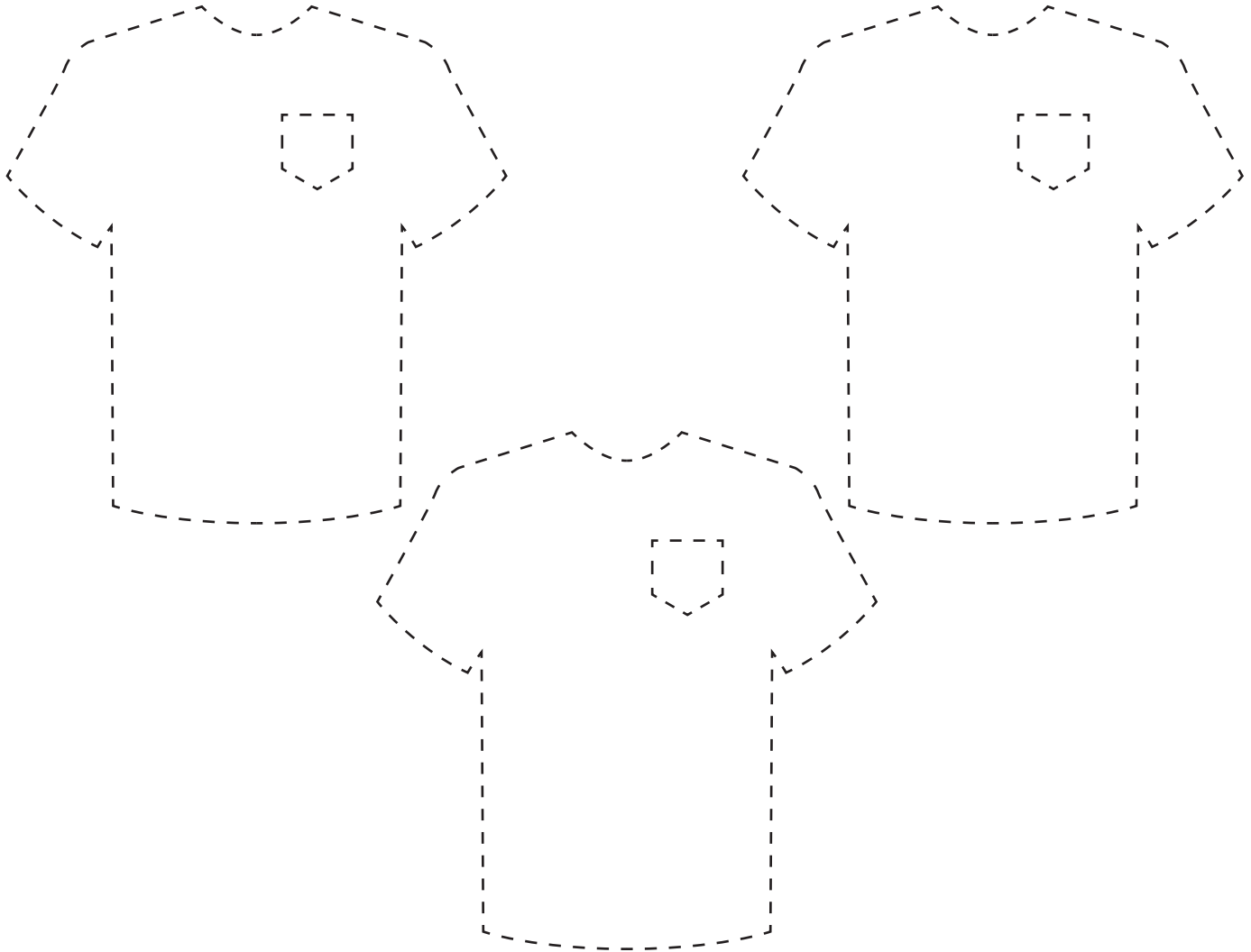


7: NO POCKET

Time limit: 60 minutes

You've been approached by an entrepreneur to help create a new line of graphic T-shirts. They have a printing technology that allows you to create a wraparound full-color design that covers every inch of the T-shirt, with one exception: the pocket. That area will be left unprinted, to display the color of the T-shirt fabric.

Create a set of three patterns that can be used for the launch of this new brand. For this first set, the patterns must incorporate things you might find in a shirt pocket.



BUILD ON THIS

Make several sets of shirts, each for a different group of people. For example, you might make a set for children, or people in different occupations, or employees at specific companies. Each set must include three related patterns.

CROSS-TRAIN

Instead of things found in a pocket, make a set of shirts that incorporates your work from Exercise 2. Make T-shirt sets of the album art for both children and adults that a family can wear together. Remember, each set needs three patterns.

8: OCCASIONALLY SMART PHONE

Time limit: 60 minutes

Collectively, Americans check their phones more than 8 billion times a day. That's a lot of hours looking at a little screen. People come up with all sorts of strategies to reclaim this time. But you've got to wonder, why doesn't the phone itself have something to help with this problem?

You've been hired to design a phone that allows only certain applications for use at particular times of the day. Think of a person that you know and the apps that they use, and come up with ideas for how this application would fit into their life. Then sketch a storyboard to show how your solution would work in action.



BUILD ON THIS

Spread out the availability of the apps over a week or month. Consider how the phone would work with this new constraint, and sketch a new storyboard for how this solution would work.

CROSS-TRAIN

Recalling Exercise 3, develop a set of 24 bottles for the home or office, each with a single object to let users know what apps are available at specific times of day.

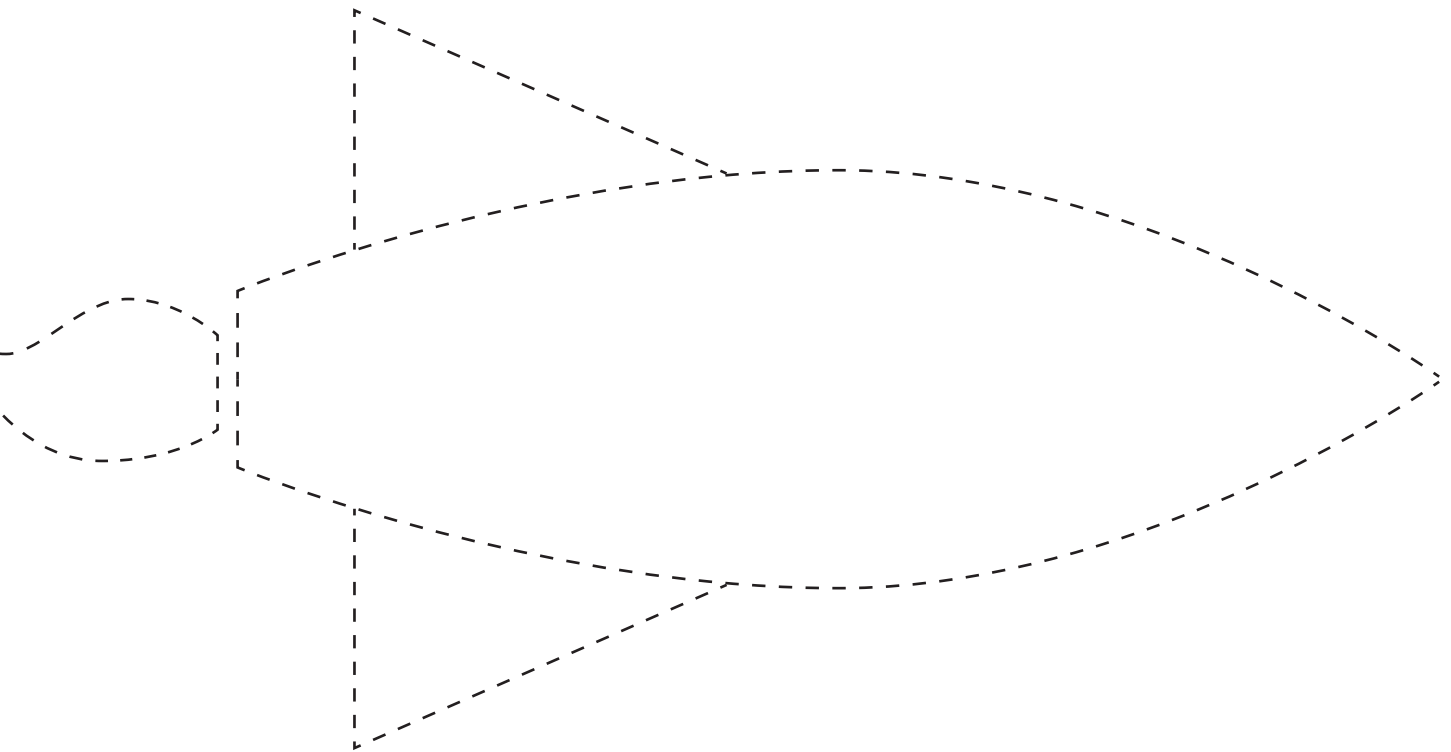


9: ICONOGRAPHIC INTERGALACTIC

Time limit: 30 minutes

The Moon. Mars. Saturn. Jupiter. In a matter of decades, we are poised to visit the farthest reaches of our solar system. And with recent evidence of other worlds that could sustain life, it's only a matter of time until we come into contact with aliens. What will their first impression of us be? How can designers help shape that encounter?

You've been approached by a private space travel company with a novel request: Create an iconographic message that can be printed at large scale across their spacecraft. The message should let aliens know something about who we are and our friendly intentions. What should the message be? What forms of iconography do you believe would best get that message across? Where should the message be placed on their ship to be most visible, and at what scale?



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BUILD ON THIS

Make a message for a specific type of ship: military, explorer, science, medical, fuel, humanitarian, diplomat and so forth.

CROSS-TRAIN

Look back at Exercise 7. Design a set of patterned shirts for the crew of this ship using elements from your iconographic message.

10: WHAT IN THE WORLD?

Time limit: 30 minutes

Every so often, we meet someone whose experience growing up was very different from our own. Maybe they grew up without electricity. Maybe they had 16 siblings, or they were an only child.

But no matter where you came from, there are things that all of us have experienced, like the warmth of the sun on our skin. The same is not the case for other phenomena we experience in nature. Some people may never see certain constellations, meteor showers or the aurora borealis. There are people who will go their entire lives without experiencing snow or a tornado.

Think of a phenomenon like this that you've personally experienced, and design a tri-fold brochure that describes it to someone who has never experienced it before. Though this brochure might be the only opportunity to ever experience this phenomenon, you may not use photographs in your design.



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BUILD ON THIS

Consider a more personal phenomenon: food. Design a brochure to communicate a favorite dish to someone who's never encountered it before.

CROSS-TRAIN

Speaking of contacting aliens, the intergalactic ship from Exercise 9 has found some aliens who would like to visit Earth. Develop an informational brochure to iconographically communicate six different phenomena on our planet to them. **HOW**

David and Mary Sherwin are co-founders of Ask The Sherwins, LLC, a consulting and training firm that coaches design teams on how to work together better and create great products. Their books from HOW include Creative Workshop and Success by Design. www.askthesherwins.com