

Please type your questions here and **Dominic L Muren/DM** and **I (Karen Cheng/KC)** will answer them!

Q1: With the traditional roots of the design program (I.e., Bauhaus -> Cranbrook -> UW) comes incredible visual design and also incredibly challenging/intense crit sessions. While these have gotten less intense over the years, I'm especially curious how the Design 166 class has changed and where it's going next.

How does the design program think about mental health within crits? And for 166, how do you maintain an environment where you can choose the top of the class and help students learn/perform without resulting in burnout?

DM: I can answer this from my perspective— it's a good question.

For Crit: I think we've definitely as a division moved away from the idea that a critique is a sort of paternalistic venue where an all knowing professor just tells you things are wrong or right. This started well before I got here 16 years ago, but I've even noticed it happening in that time. There's more recognition that all participants in a critique can give valuable design insights based on their particular lived experiences, as well as offering creative ideas for how to move a design in another direction. I think that the role of the professor in critique has evolved to be much more of a moderator of a discussion, and a guide if the discussion goes off the rails.

KC: I think the key here is for students to learn to separate themselves from their work. That is, you are not your work. As a group, we come together during critique to think about how the work can be improved. If parts of the work have flaws, we want to identify those flaws and figure out how to fix them. I expect that all design work (even the work that I make myself) has flaws, and I want to find them and make my own work as good as it can be. If I identify flaws in student work, I am not saying that the student is flawed—i.e., not a good person, or not a good designer. We work toward making the work as good as it can possibly be.

In doing this, I personally try to use humor and good will. I know students are trying to figure out if they should become designers, and it can be discouraging to hear that your work has problems. It's nice here if students can have a growth mindset, and see setbacks as opportunities to grow. The information designer Nigel Holmes has a nice illustration of a growth mindset [here](#). The growth mindset is a concept developed by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck—I think her book “[Mindset](#)” is great.

I wanted to mention (perhaps this is bragging) that I did get a very nice email recently from a student that commented on our class atmosphere:

I also wanted to thank you for always creating a welcoming and fun environment in class as well. I can speak for a lot of my peers when I say that I love coming to class and learning from you. I am always excited for crit! You provide such thoughtful feedback, advice and suggestions to stretch my thinking. I appreciate how you challenge me to think outside the box! I am inspired by how passionate you are about design, and how you care for us students, so thank you for all you do for us!!

Q2: In my discussions with Informatics faculty, they mentioned that over the past decade, the Design program has made it virtually impossible for non-design majors to enroll in its courses (unless you have a connection with the professor).

I'm curious why the Design program doesn't allow more non-design majors to take some of its courses? For example, in HCDE, even though resources and classroom space are limited, they provide a Google form

where non-HCDE students can petition to join specific courses. While only a small number of applicants are accepted each year, those few students benefit from a pivotal learning experience.

In Informatics, there's a significant lack of design course offerings. It would be great if, as a community, we could support our shared interests in student learning and enrichment—whether that's design students seeking technical exposure in Informatics courses or Informatics students wanting to grow their design skills through advanced design classes.

KC: This is very timely, because faculty in the Design Division recently discussed creating more visual design courses for non-majors. More recently, Professor Annabelle Gould developed DESIGN 250: Visualizing Ideas — see <https://sdb.admin.uw.edu/timeschd/uwnetid/sln.asp?QTRYR=AUT+2024&SLN=13959>. This course was specifically targeted toward non-majors.

I'd like to learn more about the kind of design courses that iSchool students (such as yourself) are most interested in taking? I don't think that we could enlarge our existing courses, because studio courses tend to be difficult to scale, due to the amount of time that is needed for one-on-one skill development. It's perhaps similar to music courses, where it takes time for each student to play their instrument and then receive critique—this is why studio classes are three hours. It's more time-efficient to run courses that can assess students with exams vs. projects.

It's also challenging to teach a design course when students have different levels of preparation. Because design students take prerequisites in sequence, they have a uniform level of prior knowledge. It's similar to the preparation in STEM classes — all the students take physical chemistry and calculus prior to organic chemistry. It would be hard to teach organic chemistry to a mixed class of students who had (or hadn't had) all of the same grounding.

Q3: I was wondering what the class structure and what topics/concepts we will learn about in Design 166? I heard there are 3 major projects we have to do, but other than that, I'm not so sure. What will we be doing in the lecture vs. quiz section?

This is going beyond Design 166, but I'm planning to major in VCD but also interested in making packaging for products or designing merchandise in some way. Are these things more VCD or IxD heavy?

KC: Yes, there will be three projects in DESIGN 166. (We have sometimes done two projects instead of three, but this coming Winter 2025 we will do three projects). Our goal is for the three projects to introduce students to each of the three UW Design majors: Visual Communication Design (VCD), Industrial Design (ID), and Interaction Design (IxD). Typically, the VCD project is a cover of some kind—like a book cover or magazine cover. The ID project has been packaging or a 3d form. The IxD project has varied considerably—we've done it as the design of a service (experience design). For example, one year we asked students to design a product or service that would help UW design students make friends.

In terms of lecture vs. critique, the way the class works is that all students in the class come to lecture twice a week (next quarter, this will be Tuesday and Thursdays). During the lecture we introduce the projects, and we cover how to complete the projects. That is, we cover: 1) how to think about the problem, 2) how to follow a design process to brainstorm possible solutions/ideas, develop those ideas from initial concept to finished solutions, and 3) how to use various tools—software, camera, etc.—to produce your solution. On Friday, students are broken up into smaller groups of 16 students for critique. During critique, students share their work and it is

discussed. Critique is actually more important than lecture, IMHO — because that's where you receive specific feedback on how to improve your idea/design. Does that answer your question? Feel free to follow up.

DM: To answer the second question, is packaging design more of an ID or VCD job, that's a great question, and it's one whose answer is somewhat in flux these days. First, it depends on what the primary material is that the packaging is made out of—for example, packaging printed on bags, relatively simple cardboard boxes, or even somewhat complexly folded, but relatively standardized boxes might be designed mostly by a person with VCD-style skills: 2d graphic production, typesetting, color, and logo/mark making, etc. On the other hand, you might be a company trying to significantly elevate the perceived value of a product through relatively complex packaging. Or, maybe you're packaging a product which needs special protection for shipping. This quickly becomes an industrial design kind of problem, because you are answering questions where thinking in 3 dimensions, and with varied materials matter.

Although there are the possibilities for some interesting user journey maps which describe how packaging works, the way our faculty teaches IxD at the UW, it's less likely that those students would go on to design packaging-involved experiences. IxD tends to be a less materialist focus within design (though I teach a few junior-level courses for IxD which challenge that 😊)

The good news is, we'll very likely get to design some packaging in 166, and you'll have a chance to see what parts you like, and where that interest might take you, major-wise.

Q4: Hi! I know that there are three different projects for this class, but I was wondering what the timeframe for completing each project looks like? For example, are we given a few weeks to work on one project and then are constantly altering said project based on the feedback given from the critiques?

KC: Hi! Thanks for joining!! It's a 10-week quarter. We are planning to use about 4 weeks each for Project 1(VCD) and Project 2 (ID). Then we are going to do a shorter IxD project for about 2 weeks. There's minimal overlap between projects. We usually introduce the next project while students are finishing the previous one. That way, they can begin thinking about the next project in a kind of "background ideation" way. Students continuously develop and alter the project based on feedback given from the critiques, and from ideas that they have as they work on the project. Does that answer your question?

Q5: Thanks so much for doing this AMA! I'm taking Design 166 in the winter and I was wondering: what are some of the most common mistakes students make while taking Design 166? And what are some of the biggest roadblocks that prevent them from succeeding in the course?

KC: Thanks so much for joining! Okay, common mistakes! I'll list four:

1) Not effectively managing time. I am *shocked* that so many students will wait until Thursday night to start their work for Friday's critique. That is extremely unwise. It's far better to work a little bit every day rather than try to force all the work to happen in one evening. IMHO, the approach should be like preparing food for cooking. You wouldn't try to force-marinate a beautiful piece of salmon in one hour. Much better to let it gently soak up the flavors over several days. (Note: the work that is done between 3am-6am inevitably has very little value—low quality. Students then are too wiped out physically to get much out of critique. DO NOT STAY UP ALL NIGHT).

2) Not making enough different ideas at the outset. The best way to get a good idea is to have a lot of ideas. Often

students marry their first idea—they spend a lot of time trying to make their first idea work. Unfortunately, usually the first idea you have is the most obvious; you have to get it out so that you can move on to the next idea, which is usually better. It's hard to learn to let go and stay loose. If you have time/interest, I think [Roger Oech's book "Whack on the Side of the Head"](#) is a great read about how to brainstorm many ideas.

3) Not embracing their design community. The most successful students don't feel competitive with other students in the class. The most successful students take advantage of CLUE, office hours, and make friends with other students so that they have a fun study group (one trio of students had a weekly "whine/wine and design" gathering—others met at a boba shop after class to brainstorm).

4) Not having fun. Design is a form of play. You get the best ideas when you are fun and relaxed. You should not try to force ideas by forcing yourself to stay seated at the library for four hours until you think of something. Much better to take a walk, go to an art museum (maybe the [Henry Art Gallery](#)), look at books at the [UW Art Library](#), or watch interesting films by directors with unique visual approaches.

In closing, I would highly recommend the book ["How to be a design student" by Mitch Goldstein](#).

DM: Karen's off and running on that first Q, so I'll talk Roadblocks:

There are a few ways that 166 is different from most other courses that students have taken, and this fundamental difference from other kinds of college study can make it tricky to get comfortable at first. So, here are a few high-level ideas that might help as you move through the class.

1) Critique isn't adversarial - I think that students often come into critique with a very defensive stance. Like, I need to stand up for my design, and defend it. Since most designs start off not very good, this can be a tough process, because you end up being defensive all the time. A more productive way to approach critique is with a sort of detached curiosity. When you pin up your work, step back, and try to imagine that you're with a group of your friends at an art gallery, and you come upon this exhibition of a bunch of posters or whatever. Try to look at them as if you're looking at them for the first time, and try to respond to critique as though this gallery idea was true—they're just work, you don't need to defend anything. I find students are better able to see past their own assumptions about what makes work good with this perspective.

2) There is no right answer. Seriously, we literally don't know the answer. Professor Cheng and I have decades of experience looking at designs and thinking about how shapes and forms can be composed into aesthetic, functional compositions. But that only gives us the ability to see directions for possible refinement, not some magic third eye that lets us just see the design you should make. There is an amazing, and very strange book called *The Tracker*, by Tom Brown, who was, among other things, an expert at tracking humans and animals through the world by their footprints (he worked for the FBI at one point tracking fugitives). Anyway, Tom Brown liked to say that *"every animal had a life that was a set of tracks through the world, and at the end of that track was a skull."* This is a pretty creepy sentiment, but also kind of awesome. And very much like design! Because every finished design is the skull at the end of a long process of taking one step after another, making design decisions, until you make a finished product. Design is the process, not the thing. We don't know the answer, and we can't tell you what to make, but we can help you figure out what step to take next.

OK, one more...

3) Challenge yourself to see differently. What I mean by that is, every time you learn a new way of thinking about the world, you are learning a way to see it. Organic chemistry makes you realize that most matter we are made

from, or interested in, is actually made from like 6 elements, and it's all just information, the arrangement of those atoms. Calculus makes you see the world as vectors of speed, acceleration, and jerk. Modern dance makes you see the world in terms of the relationships and volumes of space described between people's bodies. Sometimes students come into 166 thinking that they already have aesthetic taste (and they do) so they don't have to learn to see differently. But all of the rules, guidelines, tips, tricks, and best practices we have to offer depend on this new way of seeing. If you're not looking in the right way, you're not going to be able to use the things you learn.

Q6: I have a Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX9V point-and-shoot digital camera (link to the camera on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Sony-Cyber-shot-DSC-HX9V-Digital-Panorama/dp/B004HYFX0C>), and I was wondering if it would work for the course? Thank you!

KC: Thanks for joining us! Sorry for the Reddit problems!

This camera seems fine. We aren't so fussy about the type of camera that students have. Some students use their phone. TBH, the idea behind your photos/visuals is more important than the camera. You might like to borrow (for free!) a digital single lens reflex camera (DSLR) from the UW STLP program to see the difference that a large sensor/lens makes. See: <https://stlp.uw.edu/equipment/cameras/>

Q7: What would you say are your expectations of student works and abilities in each of the design fields going into the class, vs. coming out of it?

DM: I'm not sure if I'm understanding this exactly right, but let me give it a shot.

We know that this is an introductory course, so as far as entering DES 166, we are mainly looking for students with an interest in going into a design field, and the motivation to keep up with a challenging (but achievable!) workload. We hope that graduates of 166 will have developed skills in these areas:

- *Project management / time management* - we will give you a schedule that makes it easier to make incremental progress on these projects (weekly critiques, suggestions for what to work on each week, etc) but the most successful students set their own sub-quests during the week to ensure that they aren't waiting until the night before critique to make something.
- *Aesthetic Judgment* - We teach a number of guidelines for composition in the course, and we want students to be able to apply these in critique. Another way to say this is, we want you to be able to tell someone you like or don't like a design, but then explain why – not just say “because I say so”
- *Technical Making* - You'll learn how to use software to make 2d compositions. You'll learn how to use sketching to visualize your ideas. You'll learn how to use cutting tools with cardboard to mock up 3d ideas quickly. And you'll learn techniques for brainstorming and cataloging your ideas. All of these skills are the foundation for majors in design.
- *Problem Definition* - One of the most important skills designers develop is problem definition – a well defined problem, with specific description, and useful context information almost presents solutions automatically, while a loosely defined or ignorantly defined problem is difficult to begin to solve, because you're asking the wrong questions, or it isn't even clear what question you're trying to answer, and you may make work that just exists, without responding to that problem.
- *Social Creativity* - Even though 166 projects are solo projects, the students who make the most progress in the class tend to develop relationships with peer brainstorming groups outside of class, or inside their

critique sections. More brains are better, and the better you can communicate with them the more powerful yours is.

Q8: How much do you think more traditional art skills like drawing, painting, and sketching will help in this class? Because I have a lot of experience in visual arts.

KC: Thanks for joining! I've taught DESIGN 166 for more than a decade now (I am old). I think it can be useful for students to have pre-existing skills in drawing/sketching and painting. But I've also seen plenty of students succeed in the class who were totally new to visual design.

I find that some students who have previous experience are somewhat attached to an existing visual style that they had already developed, and it was hard for them to work in a new way vs. their "established" process. For example, they had been drawing manga comics for quite some time, and they wanted to apply that genre/look even though the audience for our project was quite different from the audience for manga. Sometimes these students weren't very open to other ways of working, or didn't seem to have the ability to draw any other way. However, other times students who did have prior experience in visual art were more used to the activities of critique, and therefore were more comfortable talking about their work and receiving feedback. Similarly, some students had been doing a certain kind of commercial photography (like wedding portraits) and had difficulty photographing in a new way that involved capturing non-posed, "street photography." But other students were able to pivot and bring their pre-existing photography skills down a new path. There's a lot of variability amongst students.

Q9: Hi! I was wondering how much prior experience with design tools/software is helpful, and what should I do to prepare before class? I'd appreciate any insight into specific skills or software to familiarize myself with beforehand (Photoshop, Illustrator etc.) Does the class build these skills from the ground up, or is it better to come in with some knowledge?

KC: Hi! And thanks for joining! If you want to familiarize yourself with basic [Photoshop](#) and [Illustrator](#) skills (Adobe Creative Cloud) during the UW December break before January, that can be helpful. Here's information about Photoshop that you can work through: <https://www.adobe.com/products/photoshop/how-to-use.html> —and here is information on Adobe Illustrator that you can work through: <https://www.adobe.com/learn/illustrator>

Adobe has become less friendly to students due to their subscription pricing model, so you could also use the Affinity products that compete with those softwares—[Affinity Designer](#) and [Affinity Photo](#). Here is an Affinity Photo tutorial that you can work through: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGieohMvVyK> — and here is an Affinity Designer tutorial that you can work through: <https://forum.affinity.serif.com/index.php?/topic/196916-affinity-designer-2-hour-crash-course-for-beginners-2024/>

Our past student surveys showed that most 166 students had some pre-existing knowledge of Photoshop or Photoshop-like software, because digital retouching of photos is now pretty common. I should mention that we don't do any significant photoshop collaging in the class — it's more or less adjustment of exposure and simple retouching. Fewer students were familiar with Adobe Illustrator (perhaps 30-40% of the class). We don't expect students to actually illustrate with Adobe Illustrator. We use Illustrator as a layout tool.

We do go over both of these software packages during lectures, but only a few times—there is an expectation that students can catch on very quickly (on their own) with the level of the projects that we do. The project is more based on your idea than on use of the software.

In general, design is now a major that involves learning a number of different (ever-changing!) softwares, especially in the IxD program. There is still so much development of software for interaction design, including AR/VR stuff. And in ID, there are a lot of 3D rendering softwares to learn, as well as CAD softwares. I do think comfort with the idea of self-learning software is necessary for prospective design majors. Perhaps this is a widespread thing across campus as well (seems like there's more and more software for everyone to learn).

Q10: For those who didn't have the opportunity to take DESIGN 150 during fall quarter, will there be support for students who are learning the tools and software for the first time?

KC: Hi! Yes, we do cover all design tools and software that students need to use in order to complete the assigned projects. See Question 9 above if you'd like to familiarize yourself with software in advance.

Are there other questions? We want to answer your questions!!