

Design Literacy Board

Complete
Manual

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Design Literacy Board

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1. Why Are Ideas Not Enough?

Why design is not just about a “good idea”

Ideas are exciting. They are sparks that suddenly light up in the mind. But raw ideas, if not guided on the right path, are nothing but a mirage. A “good idea” does not guarantee a good design. Thousands of great ideas never become more than notes in an old notebook. What makes an idea valuable is the designer’s ability to turn it into something real.

Design is a process, not a sudden discovery. The path of building, testing, refining, and rebuilding. This path is what transforms initial ideas into outstanding designs.

Design means creating; not discovering.

From Initial Ideas to Outstanding Designs

An idea that comes to your mind is raw. It’s a spark, but a spark doesn’t bring light.

It needs to be nurtured, to follow the right path, to take shape, and be executed. Initial ideas are often attractive but unstable. Outstanding designs are born from revision, review, and repetition.

A good idea is not a guarantee of good design. It only becomes valuable when it is placed on the right path and refined. Design is the journey from a raw idea to a complete experience.

Design Means Creating, Not Discovering

Ideas are not hidden somewhere. They are neither only in minds nor up in the sky. Ideas are not found—they are made.

Design is not a sudden discovery. It is a process. A gradual creation.

A designer is not an explorer searching for something pre-existing.

A designer is a maker. Someone who creates what does not yet exist. This creation is not accidental. It has rules. A method. A process.

The foundation of design literacy is this process. It shows the path of building so that design is not accidental but consciously made.

2. Design Literacy: A Tool or a Method?

Design is not just a good idea. A good idea, if not set on the right path, leads nowhere.

Many failed designs began as great ideas but they weren't built properly.

So, what does design need? A method, a path, a process.

The design literacy framework is not just a tool you use.

It's a method, a way of thinking, a framework for decision-making.

How does this board empower designers?

Many designers don't know why a design is good or bad.

Why do some works become timeless, while others are forgotten?

The design literacy framework answers these questions.

It shows you how to control the design process,

how to choose,

how to decide,

and how to create.

How does it help designers think better?

Design is not just a technical skill.

Design is decision-making it's about making precise, informed choices.

The design literacy framework helps you think better.

Not just to create design,

but to understand more deeply, to analyze more clearly, and to produce work that makes an impact.

The Design Process vs. Design Ideas

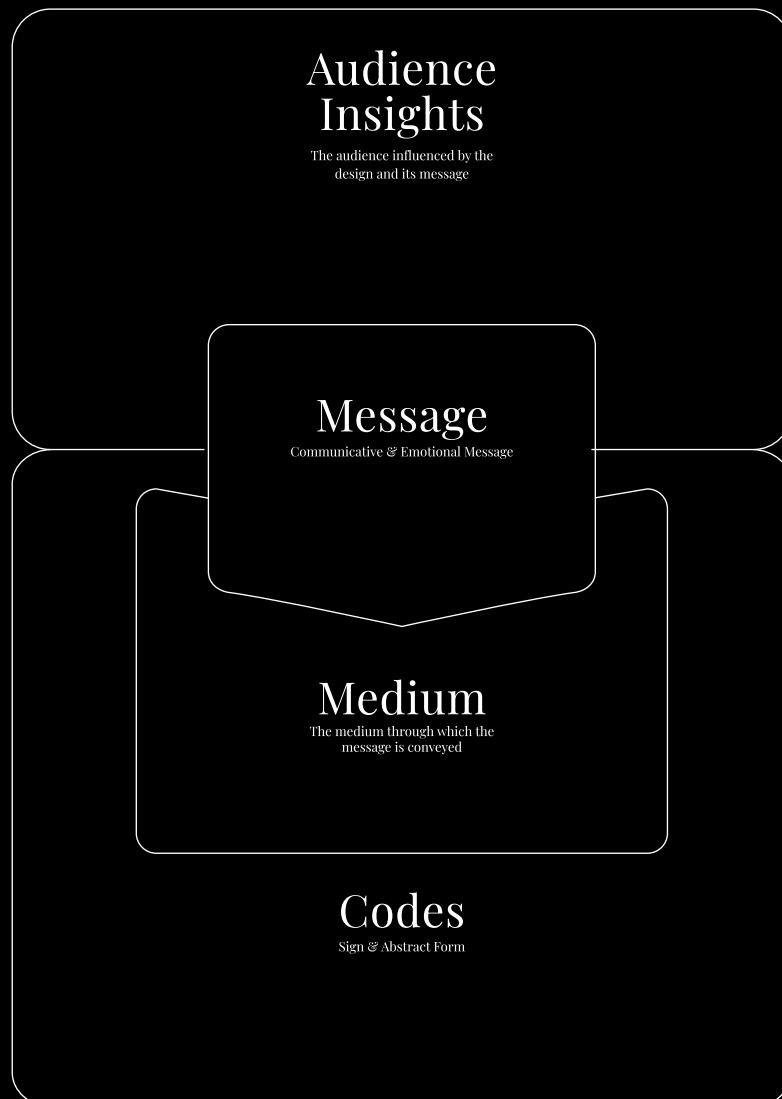
Ideas are the beginning, not the end.

A good designer masters the process not just moments of inspiration.

The design literacy framework is a path to turning raw ideas into strong, meaningful designs.

Design is not an accident; it's a series of deliberate, conscious choices.

And this framework helps you make the right ones.



3. Message Encoding

Design is a message but no message is received directly. The audience must be able to decode it. Likewise, the designer must encode the message in a way that ensures it is communicated clearly and effectively.

Every message is part of a communication process. This process includes a sender (the designer), a receiver (the audience), a message, encoding, noise (interfering elements), and feedback.

However, the most crucial part of this process is message encoding, because the audience can only understand what they are able to decode.

If the encoding is not done properly, the message will be misunderstood.

There are a few key principles to consider:

1. The design's purpose must be clear.

Every design carries a core message even if it is simply a poster, a package, or a product. This message may be a call to action, an emotional trigger, or the communication of an idea.

In some cases, the message must be immediate and explicit (such as a warning sign). In others, it may be layered and gradually understood (such as the interior design of a luxury brand intended to convey a sense of prestige).

2. Understanding the audience is essential.

The audience interprets the message based on their cultural background, personal experiences, and familiarity with signs and symbols. The designer must determine what is familiar to the audience and what is new.

A familiar sign enables quicker understanding of the message, while an unexpected one can draw attention.

3. Select the appropriate signs, forms, and encoding methods.

Every message is conveyed through visual elements such as form, material, color, typography, composition, and more.

Forms can be either iconic or abstract:

Iconic forms (such as the image of a lock representing security) communicate the message directly.

Abstract forms rely more on emotional response and tend to generate broader, interpretive impressions.

Typography, color, and composition function as visual languages and shape how the message is perceived. For example, the color red might signify danger in one context, but indicate that an electronic device is powered on in another.

To better understand this concept, it's important to study theories of semiotics, iconology, and the broader contexts of communication.

How to Start Encoding?

At this stage, the designer is only anticipating potential codes not making final decisions yet.

Start with a preliminary list:

What message do you want to communicate?

What signs and forms might convey that message?

Should you use familiar signs or unexpected forms?

What factors might interfere with how the message is understood?

Make your selections without bias. At this stage, there is no need to make any final decisions. These selections will be reviewed and refined in the following steps.

- *To support this process, you can use AI tools to identify visual codes that are familiar to your audience. Be cautious not to provide shallow or clichéd interpretations—especially when dealing with abstract forms.*

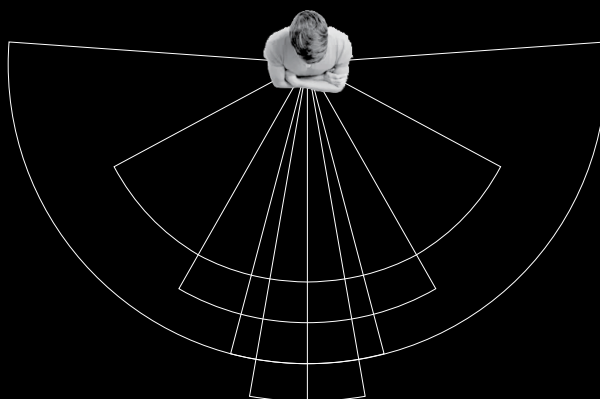
But how do we know if this coding is working?

To determine which signs or forms communicate the message more effectively, you need to consider the context, the audience, and how visual perception works.

This is where testing, revising, and refining become essential. In the next section, we'll look at how to guide this process.

Field of Views

Where will the design appear in the viewer's sight?



Attention Pattern

- BottomUp
Unexpected Forms
- TopDown
Familiar Sign/Form
- No Attention

Processing Fluency

Easy to Process

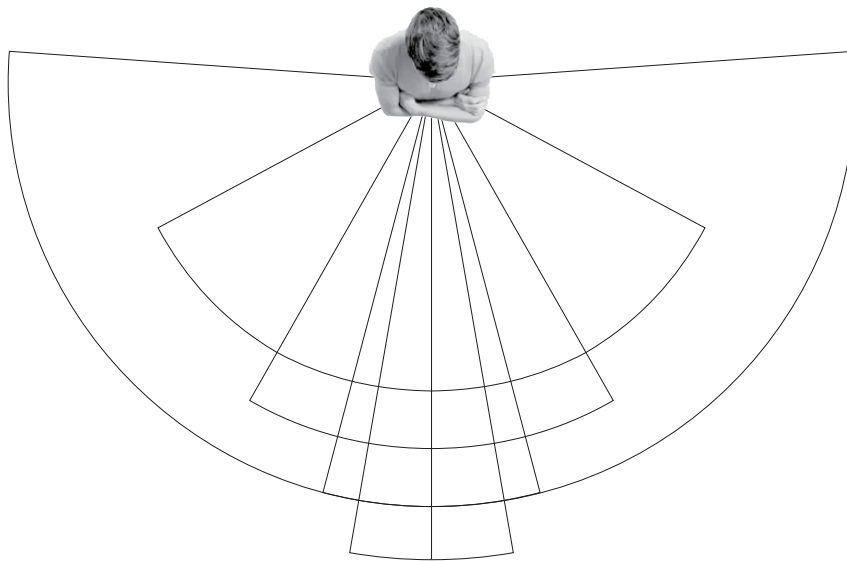
Hard to Process

- Simple Forms
- Typical Forms

- Complex Forms
- Atypical Forms

Check Blandness

Check Interestingness



4. Design in the Field of Views

The human eye has a wide field of views approximately 210 degrees horizontally and 135 degrees vertically. However, this breadth does not mean that all areas are seen with equal clarity.

At any given moment, the eye perceives everything, but it focuses on only one point. The farther an object is from this point known as the line of sight the blurrier the image becomes, and the less detail is perceived. This characteristic directly affects how a design is seen.

Where does your design fall within the field of views?

The process of visual perception can be considered in three stages:

1. *Before seeing: The design has not yet drawn attention but is present within the field of views.*
2. *Seeing: The eye focuses on the design and begins to process its information.*
3. *After seeing: The mind stores and interprets the image or discards it.*

In this section, our focus is on the first stage:

Before the design is consciously seen, where does it appear within the viewer's field of views?

Is it in the periphery, or in the center of attention?

Does it need to capture direct focus, or is it enough to remain on the edge of visual awareness?

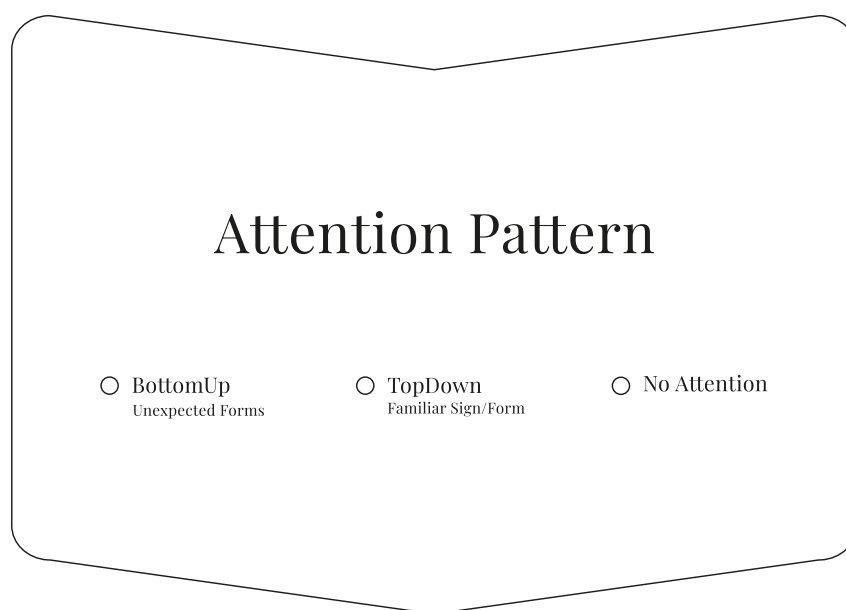
5. Attention Patterns

There are two types of attention in visual perception:

Top-Down Attention

In this mode, the viewer is actively looking for something and consciously trying to find it.

They rely on visual cues, text, and guidance to locate the information they seek.



Bottom-Up Attention

Here, attention is drawn without prior intention.

Visual elements that are sudden, contrasting, unexpected, or sensorially strong trigger this type of attention.

How should these two types of attention be used?

If your design aims to capture Bottom-Up attention, use strong contrast, unfamiliar forms, unexpected colors, or dynamic elements.

If your design is meant to engage Top-Down attention, rely on familiar cues, clear structure, and straightforward messaging.

Returning to the First Column:

Now that you've identified where your design appears within the field of vision and how it captures attention, go back to the first column and evaluate which of the codes you initially predicted align with voluntary (Top-Down) or involuntary (Bottom-Up) attention.

If the design is based on Top-Down (voluntary) attention:

- *Which familiar cues, texts, or structures help clarify the message?*
- *Can the viewer easily decode the message?*

If the design is based on Bottom-Up (involuntary) attention:

- *Which unexpected forms or visual contrasts are likely to interrupt the viewer and grab attention?*
- *Is the message still clear, or do some codes need to be revised?*

Note:

Your choices at this stage will determine how the design is perceived and how effective it will be.

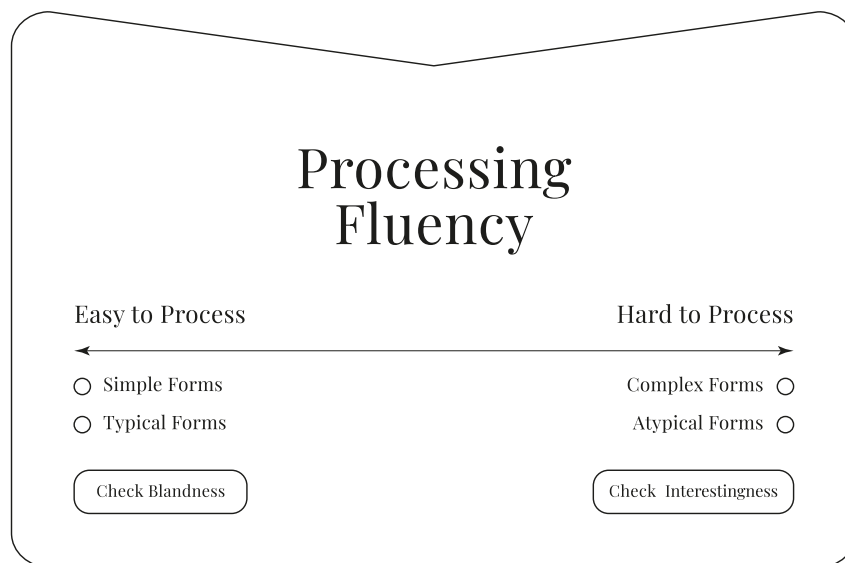
So if something doesn't seem to be working, this is the perfect opportunity to adjust and fine-tune your visual codes!

6. Processing Style

Every design, depending on the amount and complexity of its information and the nature of its message, falls into one of two categories:

Easy to Process: The amount of information is low, the message is clear and direct, and the forms should be simple and familiar.

Hard to Process: The amount of information is high, the message is layered and context-dependent, and the forms can be more complex or even unconventional.



How do we determine this?

The Processing Fluency chart helps us understand whether the design is easy or hard to process.

If the design is on the right side of the chart (Hard to Process):

Use more complex forms, unconventional visual compositions, or specific codes.

The design should signal to the viewer that the information being conveyed is rich and multi-layered.

If the design is on the left side of the chart (Easy to Process):

Use simple forms, familiar cues, and clear visual structures.

The goal is to communicate the message quickly and effortlessly.

Why is this important?

Every second, the viewer is exposed to a large volume of visual information. If your design fails to find the right position within their field of vision, it will simply be ignored.

At this stage, the designer must decide how to guide attention:

Should the message be conveyed through familiar and direct cues, or through complex and unexpected forms?

Returning again to the first column: Are your codes Easy to Process or Hard to Process?

Now that you've identified your design's position in the field of vision and the type of attention it triggers, return to the first column and evaluate how the codes you initially predicted are processed in terms of information load:

If your design is Easy to Process:

Have you used familiar cues and simple forms?

Is the message understandable without much effort?

Could it be too simple, possibly reducing its impact?

If your design is Hard to Process:

Does the complexity help convey a deeper message, or does it confuse the viewer?

Is the viewer expecting this level of complexity, or should some elements be adjusted?

Do the forms and codes used successfully signal depth without making the experience unpleasant?

Note:

Consider the viewer's cognitive load. Some messages require simplicity; others benefit from complexity.

Where does your design fall on this spectrum?

If something isn't working, this is the time to make adjustments!

Personality

Select a personality for your design

● SINCERE

● COMPETENT

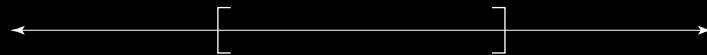
● RUGGED

● EXCITING

● SOPHISTICATED

Creativity Range

Understand the norms, then break them with finesse



Visual Flow

1st _____ Sec _____

2nd _____ Sec _____

3rd _____ Sec _____

4th _____ Sec _____

7. The Personality of Design

Does design have a personality?

Design Personality: Beyond Form and Color

Design is not merely a collection of shapes and symbols. Every design carries a personality one that subconsciously influences how the audience perceives it and shapes their expectations of the experience it offers.

Jennifer Aaker, in her research, introduced five core brand personalities. This framework can also be applied to design. These five categories help explain how your design is perceived and what kind of feeling or impression it leaves in the viewer's mind.

Personality

Select a personality for your design

● SINCERE

● COMPETENT

● RUGGED

● EXCITING

● SOPHISTICATED

Introducing the Five Core Design Personalities

Sincere

Traits: Warm, honest, friendly, human-centered, traditional, emotional

Best for: Designs that rely on human connection, trust, and emotional resonance.

Exciting

Traits: Adventurous, energetic, youthful, unexpected

Best for: Designs that aim to inspire a sense of discovery, excitement, and passion.

Competent

Traits: Professional, intelligent, efficient, reliable, stable

Best for: Designs that need to convey credibility, accuracy, and expertise.

Sophisticated

Traits: Refined, luxurious, unique, complex, elegant

Best for: Designs that should communicate a sense of luxury, superiority, or meticulous attention to detail.

Rugged

Traits: Tough, durable, industrial, bold, raw

Best for: Designs that must express strength, endurance, and resilience.

How to Define the Design Personality

1. *Revisit the first column: Does the design convey sincerity or authority? Does it appear youthful or rugged?*
2. *Consider the second column: How does the design attract attention? Is it dynamic and exciting, or stable and formal?*
3. *Select one of the five core personalities: Which set of characteristics best aligns with the intended message?*

Choosing a design personality should be a deliberate decision.

Design personality should be chosen intentionally.

Each choice affects how the design is perceived and how impactful it becomes. So, ask yourself:

Does your design feel credible? (Competence)

Does your design enhance human emotion? (Sincerity)

Is your design energetic and dynamic? (Excitement)

Is your design luxurious and refined? (Sophistication)

Is your design tough and bold? (Ruggedness)

Tip: Your design should clearly express its personality at a glance.

Next Steps

Assess whether the chosen personality falls into conventional or stereotypical patterns.

The next phase involves exploring how to move beyond these clichés in order to achieve a more distinctive and original outcome.

8. Creative Boundaries

Before making any changes, it is essential to identify what aspects of your design have become cliché.

In many cases, it is not the core idea that is repetitive, but rather the way it is executed.

1. Identify cliché executions of your selected codes.

Refer back to the first column and review the codes you have chosen to express your message.

Examine how these ideas are typically represented in design.

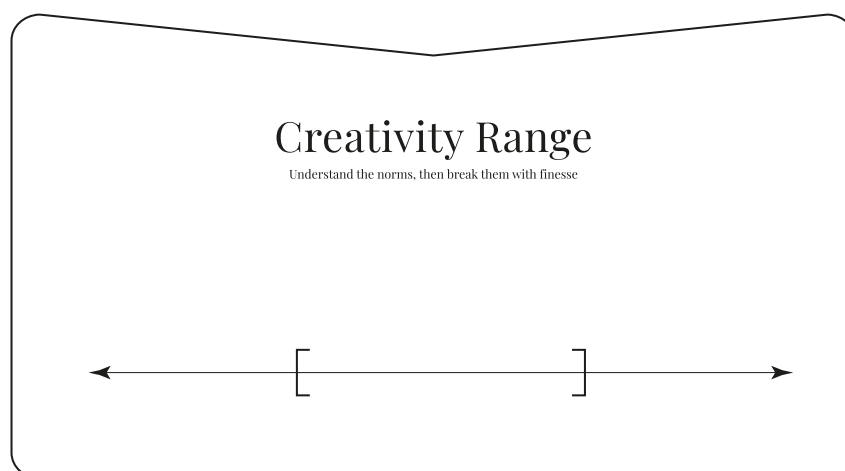
2. Assess what can be changed to move beyond the expected.

Change the scale. If an element is usually presented at a standard size, try making it significantly larger or smaller.

Change the color. If certain colors are commonly associated with this message, consider taking a different approach.

Change the composition. Rather than following traditional layouts, rearrange the elements in an unexpected way.

Add an unexpected detail or remove an element to shift the visual tone or introduce surprise.



At this stage, the goal is to move beyond conventional and expected forms of execution without compromising the clarity of the message.

Any changes made should remain aligned with the core message.

Look closely at the design:

Does it still resemble typical examples?

Do the changes help convey the message more effectively?

Is it distinct enough to capture the viewer's attention?

If you can confidently answer these questions, you have likely succeeded in breaking free from cliché.

9. Visual Flow

When encountering a design, the human eye perceives elements in a specific sequence. This order is neither random nor solely dependent on visual appeal; rather, it is shaped by the biological and cognitive patterns of the eye and brain.

Eye-tracking studies have shown that the eye undergoes two main stages when viewing a design:

1. Saccades (Rapid Eye Movements)

The eye makes quick, jumping movements in search of important points within the image. These movements typically proceed from left to right and top to bottom (in Latin-based languages), and from right to left and top to bottom (in languages such as Persian and Arabic).

2. Fixations (Eye Pauses)

The eye pauses at certain points to process information.

The duration of a fixation depends on the visual importance and complexity of the information at that point.

Visual Flow

1st _____	Sec _____
2nd _____	Sec _____
3rd _____	Sec _____
4th _____	Sec _____

How Does the Human Eye Scan a Coffee Machine?

Eye-tracking studies show that users typically scan a household appliance in the following sequence:

1. Main Element or Overall Body Shape (0.8 to 2.5 seconds)

The first thing noticed is the general shape of the device.

If the form is overly complex, viewers tend to fixate longer to understand it.

Example: The Nespresso Vertuo coffee machine, with its cylindrical body shape, naturally directs the gaze upward.

2. Nozzle and Coffee Outlet (1.5 to 3 seconds)

Users immediately check where the coffee comes out.

The nozzle's position should be clear to convey ease of use.

Example: Jura coffee machines design the coffee outlet nozzle as the primary focal point.

3. Control Buttons and Display (0.6 to 2 seconds)

The eye searches for controls to understand how to operate the device.

A larger number of buttons increases fixation time, which can cause a sense of complexity for the user.

Example: The Nespresso Essenza Mini has only two buttons for main functions, reducing cognitive load.

4. Water Reservoir (0.5 to 1.5 seconds)

Users look to check the water level and how to refill the reservoir.

Example: Keurig machines feature semi-transparent water tanks to allow quick assessment of water quantity.

5. Base and Bottom Part of the Machine (0.3 to 1 second)

If the base has a drip tray, the eye briefly stops there.

Example: Breville Barista Express machines design their drip trays to attract minimal attention.

10. Introduction

What you have read in this guide is an introduction to design literacy not a conclusion.

The Design Literacy Board is not merely a tool; it is a way of thinking. What you have learned provides a framework to help you see design beyond fleeting inspirations.

This is only the beginning of the journey.

Design is a skill that grows through practice and experience. Every design presents a new challenge that requires thoughtful decision-making. What matters most is knowing how to make those decisions:

How to define the message?

How to shape the form?

How to guide the viewer's gaze?

How to move the design beyond clichés?

To truly master this approach, you must actively engage with it.

11. Continuing Learning

Study real-world examples. Analyzing case studies of global designs and examining how designers made decisions will deepen your understanding.

Practice applying the Design Literacy Board to your own projects.

Document your decision-making process and explore ways to improve it.

Watch the Design Literacy video courses.

This guide provides only the fundamentals. The Vend Design Academy courses are designed for deeper understanding and advanced practice.

Design is not merely knowledge to be read—it is a skill to be learned. If you want to become a better designer, you must practice, analyze, and continuously improve yourself.

This guide was just an introduction. The continuation of your journey depends on your choices...

