

Project 1.

Upstream

Introduction

For the first project of this course, you will lead a UX research project that focuses on everything **but** or **surrounding** a finessed and finalized product. That is, this is the part of the design process that is “upstream” anything “final.”

Your project will be based in either (1) your own topic of inquiry or (2) one of the design challenges below.

Through the phases below, you will outline a project, conduct research, synthesize findings, use the findings to build a research case study, and present your process and findings to the class.

Phases

1. Discovery
2. Ideating, Goals, & Strategies
3. Audience & Journeys
4. Synthesis
5. Presentation & Case Study

Phase 1. Discovery — *Weeks 2 & 3*

Explore your own topic of inquiry or a design challenge, below.

(1) Your own topic of inquiry...

- Is something you personally are deeply interested in
 - You can't stop thinking about it...
 - The topic keeps coming back to you somehow...
- Is something you sense the world needs, too
- *What is the thing that would most likely not exist if you didn't do it?*

(2) Or, two possible design challenges to consider:

- Design Challenge 1 — Extreme Weather

As the climate crisis accelerates, people, infrastructures, and ecosystems face unprecedented threats. In St. Louis, the impact is real. The 2022 flash floods devastated neighborhoods. The May 16, 2025 tornado first touched down near the WashU community before devastating vulnerable neighborhoods in North St. Louis. Record heat days now define each summer. These events do not occur in isolation; they reveal vulnerabilities in our homes, technologies, institutions, and systems of care, and they call for design responses that are informed, interdisciplinary, and action-oriented.

Research the ways people learn and stay updated about these weather events. In 2025 and beyond, how should people be best informed and working together to survive in this changing weather world? Feel free to begin by researching specific and existing weather apps, websites, organizations, institutions, infrastructures, and anything else that feels particularly relevant.

- Design Challenge 2 — Care, Self-Control, Inquisitiveness

Research forms of technology that enable people to exercise care, self-control, inquisitiveness, or a combination thereof. Then, focus your research around something that explores these that hasn't been done before. You should aim to show an alternative possibility that we actually want for ourselves as humans and the world, generally uplifts the human spirit, and/or supports human creativity and learning in some sense.

Artifacts:

- Map / Diagram
- Four Questions & Findings from Four Questions

Phase 2. Ideating, Goals, & Strategies — *Week 4*

Based on your discovery phase, create a few artifacts to help better define your project: explore “what & why” primarily, then “when & who.” While what you’re creating might still be forming, these can help its emergence and overall scope definition. Additionally in class, we will try a “How Might We” brainstorm to divergently ideate ways to address your topic of inquiry.

Artifacts:

- Project Plan / Statement (500 words — what, why, when, who)
- Goals (list)
- Possible Directions / Strategies (list / map, created after “How Might We”)

Phase 3. Audience & Journeys — *Weeks 5 & 6*

In this phase, focus on the people: “who.” What people are interacting with what you’re making? What are they like? While you created overall questions in the “Discovery” phase, use this phase to more tightly define your audience. Conduct surveys with specific potential users, understand your audience, develop personas, create empathy maps, and chart out some possible user flows or journeys.

Possible Artifacts:

- Surveys
- Survey Takeaways
- Personas
- Empathy Maps
- User Flows / Journeys

Phase 4. Synthesis — *Week 7*

In this phase, focus on consolidating your research, planning your final presentation and case study. If there are any artifacts you haven’t completed in the previous phases or need to re-do for some reason that would be useful now, go ahead.

Artifacts:

- Discovery Document / Case Study (consolidates all the above)
- Instructions for Touchpoints (draft)

Phase 5. Presentation & Case Study — Week 8

The final deliverable for this project will be in two parts:

Deliverable Part 1 — A thoughtful, planned presentation (ten minutes long) that shares the research and process you carried out for the first half of the semester for this project.

Your visuals and slides can contain UX artifacts from all the previous phases designed specifically for the presentation format.

This presentation should be carefully scripted, choreographed, rehearsed, and performed. You might present from a specific space on campus. You might be wearing specific clothing. You might enlist others to help in the presentation. You might consider lighting and sound. You will present the artifacts you have made and process you explored, so consider how to do this gracefully.

Deliverable Part 2 — A set of written prompts / instructions which serve as a clear “jumping off points” for someone (a specialized designer, writer, other collaborator, or yourself in the future) to realize your project on multiple (at least 3) “touchpoints” of your product. Include any content, thoughtfully organized, that would enable this person to create each touchpoint.

One of the touchpoints should be *digital*.

One of the touchpoints should be *physical*.

One of the touchpoints should be *temporal*.

Touchpoints could be, for example:

- digital
 - website
 - app
 - software
 - hardware
 - feature or add-on
- physical
 - book
 - guide
 - installation
 - pop-up
 - uniform

- temporal
 - walking tour
 - group dinner
 - personal routine
 - board meeting
 - demo / keynote
 - digital campaign
 - in-store event

Optionally, your touchpoints might culminate in some all encompassing “style guide” which includes a name, logo or guiding images, behavior, personality, etc. which naturally filters through all the above modalities.

Guidelines

One of the most effective ways to learn about something is by making something new, sharing it with others, reflecting on this process, and doing it (or something related to it) again. This is primary research.

This is directly opposed to the traditional academic research process that you might be familiar with which relies on experiencing previously written and recorded accounts. This is secondary research.

In the case of UX Research Methods, we will be creating artifacts that help us understand a project space. Feel free to explore both traditional and experimental expressions of these. Trying out different mediums, senses, and modalities is also very welcomed. Experiment through using distinct media, at distinct scales, or with distinct approaches.

