

# History of Industrial Design Spring 2019

Matthew Bird

## 24 Questions to Ask an Object

Worth up to 200 points

### Why:

This project is designed to help you experience a thorough research process, conduct a design analysis, and become familiar with a topic you are excited about, in a meaningful and layered way.

### What:

Select a manufactured object created before 1990 that is not a GameBoy, Nintendo, or Sony Walkman. Object must be designed for use, made in multiples, and perform a function (so, for example, not a sculpture whose "use" is to be pretty, not a custom-made one-of-a-kind luxury car). Choose a SPECIFIC object, not a whole category of thing (for example, a 1948 20" Steiff mohair teddy bear, not "teddy bears," or a 1959 3M Décor Scotch tape dispenser, not "tape" or "tape dispensers").

**Email your choice BY MARCH 3 to [mbird@risd.edu](mailto:mbird@risd.edu) for approval.**

**No approval? No project.**

**Use the questions below to steer an investigation of your object.**

**Each section has a separate due date.**

**Think of this investigation as a cross shape; your object is at the center.**



The **horizontal part** of the cross is other things like your object that were available at the same time.

The **vertical part** of the cross is a history of your object (with old below = how it evolved over time to become your version, and new above = what your object evolved into).

If you are confused about any of the questions, maybe referring to the example will help clarify. Or ask!

**Note:** There is no such thing as a "yes or no" question. If your object does not have a patent, don't just answer "no" and move on with your life. What technologies does it use that are patented? What did you learn while looking for the patent?

Include a bibliography with each section.

No required format.

Print versions, or electronic files in pdf, rtf, or txt format.

### Due date summary:

- Object choice emailed by March 3
- Phase 1 March 18/20
- Phase 2 April 15/17
- Phase 3 May 13/15
- Phase 4 May 24

## Phase 1: Understand the Object

### Due March 18/20, up to 60 points

This is the center of your cross-shaped investigation. It looks only at your specific object. No need to worry about history or any other version of your object. Be descriptive; **imagine you are writing this for someone who cannot see the object.**

Find and include four images of your object.

### Describe the basics of this object:

1. What is it? (What is the category of product/use?)
2. What is it called? (Did it have a trade name?)
3. When was it made? (Can you find the year it was for sale?)
4. Where was the object available? (Look for it in catalogs, print or TV ads)
5. What did it cost? (Not what can you buy it for now on eBay. What did it cost then, when new.)

### Formal Analysis (what it looks like):

6. What are the parts? (handle, container, trigger, power cord)
7. How are the parts composed?

(Really describe it, and consider line, shape, form, balance, emphasis/focus, movement, pattern, repetition, unity)

8. What materials are used?

9. What colors are used?

(Don't say "none, it is tan." Tan is a color)

10. What textures are used?

(Don't say "none, it is smooth." Smooth is a texture)

### Functional Analysis (what the object does):

11. What does it do? (make coffee, dry hair, do hard math stuff)
12. How does it work? (What mechanisms and technologies allow it to perform its functions?)
13. Does it have a patent? (<https://patents.google.com>) (Don't just say no; does it rely on one or use technology from one? What did you find, if you didn't find one specifically for your item?)

Describe the user:

14. Who is the user? Are there secondary users? (Consider geography, social class, income, gender, ability, age, taste level etc. Looking at vintage ads and packaging might help answer you this)

Describe the designer:

15. Who designed this object?

(Was it a known person, an unknown person, a team?)

16. Where was it designed?

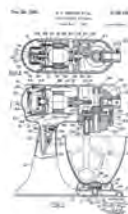
Describe manufacturing:

17. Who produced it?

(Was design and manufacturing happening in one company, or was the designer an "outsider?")

18. Where was it produced? (Same country it was designed in?)

19. How was it made? (What manufacturing methods were used?)



## Phase 2: Understand the Context of the Object (Due April 15/17, up to 50 points)

This is the horizontal part of this cross-shaped investigation. It identifies and examines competing products, helping you discover how your object is different from other designs that did the same thing at the same time. This puts your object in the world it was created for, and discovers how it differs from the competitors in price, taste level, quality, availability, features.

Find four objects that did the same thing as yours, at the same time. Include an image of each. Not older or newer models of your actual object, but examples of competing designs from the same time period. Try looking in catalogs ([www.wishbookweb.com](http://www.wishbookweb.com) is great!), print and TV ads to find objects.



### Compare each of the objects to yours (so do these 3 questions 4 times):

20. How are the objects the same? (price, availability, materials, manufacturing/production)
21. How are the objects different? (price, availability, materials, manufacturing/production)
22. Do the two objects appeal to the same consumer? (Think about price, taste, geography. Are some fancier or more "high brow"?)

## Phase 3: Understand the History of the Product Category (Due May 13/15, up to 50 points)

This is the vertical part of this cross-shaped investigation. It puts your object in an historical context so you learn how it evolved over time, what problems were resolved, what new features added, what new materials used, how price and availability changed.

Find four previous and/or later versions of your object. Include an image of each.



**Note:** Remember that new technologies are just variations of things that existed before. If you chose the first iPod you can't say there was no iPod before and so this section doesn't apply. The whole point is to learn where an iPod came from. The entire history of how people listened to music is part of this story, and you will have to make some smart decisions about what to include.



23. When was each alternative made?

24. What changed over time? (new features, different materials, new manufacturing techniques, new technologies)



#### Phase 4: Summary (Due May 24, up to 40 points):

Use images and text to create a document that tells a story.  
Include your name and answers 1 through 4 somewhere on your document.  
**If you do not, you will not get credit for this phase.**

Pick the most interesting or pivotal answer to each group of questions, and include them on your poster somewhere effective (abbreviate as needed). Deciding what to include and what to remove will not be a simple task, but is necessary to create a document that has the right amount of information.



All of the extra information you collected but do not use on your document is not wasted; it was necessary to acquire and investigate in order to identify what information is most important, and what the document needs to inform us about your topic in a meaningful way.

This phase is a design exercise, but don't treat it like a graphic design exercise. This is less about how "pretty" your poster is, and more about how you learned a lot, discovered ideas, and made decisions about reducing the information to tell us something. We care about how you identify and communicate your narrative.

Documents will be posted on Tumblr for the entire class to view.

FORMAT FOR SUMMARY:

JPG or PDF file, 11x17 inches at 150 dpi.

Emailed to mbird@risd.edu (at this size and resolution, files should be under 2M, and easy to email).

Note on grading:

Each section will be read, graded, and returned to you. It is every teacher's delight when students want to revise their work to improve it. But life is short and there are 100 of you, so I will not be able to read work multiple times. No do-overs. Take the time to read and understand the assignment, consult the example, ask questions, and produce your best effort the first time around.

