

the Art of the Book

✦ ESSAYS ✦

In each of your essays, you are “responsible for” utilizing the readings assigned up to a reasonable amount of time before your due date. The test, in our minds, of whether you have “taken responsibility” for the texts is whether your ideas are clearly building on or motivated by what we’ve read, and whether your work has made good use of (or has failed to make use of) specific ideas or information that you reasonably should have, given your topic.

In addition, you are also expected to use them as direct references, though the emphasis of your paper is not to simply repeat the ideas (by paraphrase or quotation) from our texts. You should feel encouraged to seek out other sources of information to flesh out your own ideas; and always emphasize making connections and comparisons and generating perspectives that make the ideas your own, make them fresh, etc.

All of your essays should be thesis driven. You may not always find a thesis that amounts to a “claim,” that is, something that you feel compelled to argue and support against hypothetical disagreement; but you should still have a key concept that drives the substance of your paper and lends it an organizational structure. The questions offered below are meant to stimulate and guide. You may use them in your work, but do not feel limited by them or try to answer them all.

Essay I: The Idea of the Book	A—week 3, thursday B—week 4, thursday	
<p>Several of our texts provide the framework for this essay, and Drucker’s <i>Century of Artists’ Books</i> lends us the exact phrase. Drucker charts a handful of examples of poets and artists who give us some way of articulating our relationship to the book as a cultural artifact. <i>The Smithsonian Book of Books</i> is filled with our romanticizations, passions, myths, and fascinations with books. Shahn’s essays hold a variety of approaches to thinking about one’s medium and our relationship to the form and aura of objects. Some pieces from the reader call upon our relationship to books to create allegories and elaborate thought experiments, while others chart the social, cultural, and psychological transformations that have attended the rise of book culture. (also consider introductory material in Bright and Hubert) All of these sources can inform your ‘idea of the book.’ Use this essay as an opportunity to create an effective catalogue and claim about the nature of the book as a concept, an artifact, and object with aura and portent that is wrapped up in our beliefs and attitude and defines our experiences of reading, writing, and experiencing the world. Consider, for instance, the broad questions of why books matter: Why should artists and writers be concerned with the book as a particular container of information? What does it mean to enter into the work of bookmaking? What histories, myths, and ideas are essential to understanding the art of the book as a contemporary practice? What does it mean to belong to a “book culture” or not? How are books and language intertwined? books and literature? books and art?</p>		
Essay II: Word & Image	A—week 5, thursday B—week 6, thursday	
<p>Obviously, our key texts here are the Morley and the Drucker essays. Add to these your readings from the packet on literature and language, and you should be able to make some sparks. Why does the combination of word and image seem so strained? so difficult? What’s different about the way images communicate and the way words do so? What happens to language when it becomes visual? Are typographic experiments meaningful explorations for artists? Or are they just cheap fetishizations of language—just tinkering with fonts? How do we discuss form and content in works that struggle with the combination of word and image? How are words and images different in semiotic or phenomenological terms? Is there some fundamental difference between people who specialize in one and not the other? Is something unique required to fuse them together? Why have word and image been seen as opposing media—one signifying the sensual and immediate, the other the rational, logical? How does the interest in word and image reflect concern with the ideas of McLuhan and others?</p> <p>For this essay, we want you to choose one or a few specific pieces to use extensively in your discussion. When you write about a work of art, don’t make presumptions about what it means or even what it is; take some time to “show” it to the reader and make connections between the material/formal properties of the pieces and the analysis you put it to, the meanings you attach to it. How do such works succeed and what themes do they address? Does work that combines word and image demand something special of its audience, do they offer a new way of seeing, of thinking?</p>		

Essay III: The Form of the Book	A—week 7, thursday B—week 8, thursday	
<p>What is a book? Why do we need books? What is the task of being a book artist, if the definition remains vague? Is there anything about the form of the book that makes it a particularly important medium to explore? How does the form of the book affect the aesthetic experience of “bookworks,” or of literature? Consider using this essay to analyze specific works (you may only use works to which you have full, direct access—in the rare book room, for example): what is an effective language for the criticism of artists’ books? What does attention to the formal properties of books allow artists and critics to do? You might also consider this topic an invitation to study bookbinding techniques or the technical history of binding: what’s interesting about the technological changes in the form and structure of the book? What are the principle concerns of fine binders? How do they differ from conservators? What can artists’ book makers gain from an understanding of bookbinding and conservation? How might the form and structure of books change in the future?</p>		
Essay IV: The Organism that Literature Demands	A—week 10, thursday B—week 10, thursday	
<p>What is the relationship between books and literature? As books are transformed by book artists and as our perceptions of books are transformed by the rise of new media, what can books become and what can literature become if these two arts are to remain vital? What are the demands of literature? Have they been well-suited to the book or confined to the book? What are the demands of the book form? Does it threaten literary values? Is it only irritating for writers to muck around in the form of the book—is the result the production of a few anomalies, or is there real innovation here that can produce a genre of meaningful work? What challenges do writers face if they begin to think of their work visually and physically—what opportunities? How do literature and “bookartistry” converge on some response to “The Book” idealized by Mallarmé or the mystical tomes envisioned by Borges? Does literature need books or would it survive just as surely in a purely digital environment?</p>		