

Creative Brief Studio

SESSION 11
09.30.26

The readings, Markdown and DESIGN.md, and your repo.

Workhorse Collective

ART 418 · Fall 2026

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Meets Mon + Wed
Today Session 11 · 09.30.2026

Today.

PART	WHAT	YOU LEAVE WITH
1	The readings. Davis, chapter 7, and the opening of Neumeier's <i>The Brand Gap</i> .	Two tests to run on your brief
2	Finish the creative brief. All nineteen sections, guesses marked with a question mark.	The brief on Blackboard by 2:50
3	Markdown and DESIGN.md. What a .md file is, and how a design system gets written for a machine reader.	A reason the repo is made of text files
4	Your repo. The starter template, folder by folder, then set it up.	A private repo with your work in it

What you read for today.

Douglas Davis, *Creative Strategy and the Business of Design*, chapter 7. Marty Neumeier, *The Brand Gap*, the opening and Disciplines 1 and 2.

Davis, Chapter 7: The Advanced Strategy Session.

Chapter 6 built the creative strategy framework. Chapter 7 takes each of its columns a second time.

The first pass was about quantity: fill every column. This chapter covers "the steps after quantity": what to cut, where to look for better information, and how to connect what is left. His running example is a pitch for the Amazon Fire TV Stick.

Target	Facts	Feature / Benefit	Objectives or Messages
Who needs this, described by what they do	Everything true and relevant about the brand	One tangible feature, one intangible benefit	What the business wants, and what the audience should take away

Step One: Clean for Quality.

"Look through the content and erase anything that really doesn't have relevance, even if it's correct or true."

Every item on the chart has to pass one question, and the answer has to come with a reason:

"Can we build a campaign on that?"

There is no single right answer. Davis calls this discernment: "One creative sees gold where another sees nothing."

Then Each Column, Deeper.

COLUMN	WHAT DAVIS ADDS IN CHAPTER 7
Target	Start with tech blogs and forums for behavior, then check it against syndicated research (Nielsen, Claritas, Mintel, eMarketer). For a public company, read the 10-K: its list of risks is the company's own worries, in its own words.
Facts	Make it exhaustive, and split the research across the team: one person on the brand's own site and press, another on blogs and trade press. Look past the corporate website.
Feature / Benefit	One-to-one pairs. Keep them to short fragments so you do not start writing copy.
Objectives or Messages	Mark each line O: or M:. An objective is a verb tied to a target, with a number ("increase sales by 15 percent") and a way to measure it. A message is the takeaway, not the headline: "Say it straight, then say it great" (Luke Sullivan).

The Target Is a Person, Not a Profession.

TEST	DAVIS'S EXAMPLE
Too narrow	"Tech-savvy grandmas wearing red sweaters who have one grandchild and who live on the ground floor of a third-floor walkup"
Too broad	"Librarians who own HDTVs" misses so many people.
Right	"Think tech-savvy middle-aged bookworms versus librarians."

Threads: Fill the Chart Down, Then Read It Across.

Target	Facts	Feature / Benefit	Objectives or Messages
		3 a feature and its benefit	
1 one target			
			4 one message or objective
	2 one fact		

"After populating this framework vertically, look for connections horizontally. I call these 'threads.'"
They may not sit in the same row: "The value here is the unexpected connections that emerge across categories to help you find inspiration within order."

Based on their need or behavior, this *Target* > would be interested in a conversation centered around this *Fact* > using this *Feature/Benefit* in the headline and copy to get their attention > to deliver this *Message* or accomplish this *Objective*.

The Fire TV Stick Chart, and Its Threads.

Target	Facts	Feature / Benefit	Objectives or Messages
Tech-silvers, or older users who were cutting cable out of their existing TV experience ① Binge-watching cord-cutters who are light gamers ① Amazon Prime members with HDTVs	The vast amount of content available on Amazon that includes video/entertainment/music/games ② Consolidated access to both an existing Prime Video library and multiple streaming services on their big screen ② Any specifics on the Fire TV Stick technology that enables faster streaming of content without buffering	Amazon Prime Video library Gateway to unlimited streaming (free with Prime) Amazon Prime Video library Exclusive Amazon Original content (binging enabled) ③ ASAP technology Uninterrupted entertainment experience (without buffering) ③ The Apps "Netflix, Amazon Video, HBO GO, and Hulu, plus games, music, and more" HDMI Access travels with you	④ O: Increase awareness and sales among existing Amazon Prime members with HDTVs ④ O: Become the preferred streaming device among binge-watching cord-cutters who are light gamers

DAVIS'S THREAD

Amazon Prime members > would be interested in a conversation centered around consolidated access to both their existing Prime Video library and multiple streaming services on the big screen > using a headline focused on the Apps/Experience to convey a message focused more on experiencing the entertainment you're paying for versus spending time trying to access it in different places > for an objective of increasing sales of the Fire TV Stick among existing Prime members.

A SECOND THREAD

Binge-watching cord-cutters who are light gamers > a conversation about streaming without buffering > using ASAP technology: uninterrupted entertainment > to become their preferred streaming device. (Assembled by us from his columns, to show one chart holds many threads.)

What a Thread Is For.

"With a single strategic thread you can now write a brief, create relevant design concepts, write compelling copy, or make recommendations on how a client could move forward with this line of reasoning."

"Keep in mind that the thread isn't the idea itself; it is a starting point on which to build concepts and visual directions."

For designers: "look to the words in each column for visual thought-starters." Several threads give several directions; with several teams, "give each a different strategic thread."

Neumeier, The Brand Gap.

Marty Neumeier, 2003. It promises two things on page 4: a modern definition of brand, and the five disciplines of brand-building.

Pages 1 to 80 cover the definition, the gap the book is named for, and the first two disciplines: Differentiate and Collaborate.

What a Brand Is.

FIRST	SECOND	FINALLY
A brand is not a logo.	A brand is not an identity.	A brand is not a product.

"A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or organization."

A person's, "because brands are defined by individuals, not companies, markets, or publics." A gut feeling, "because people are emotional, intuitive beings."

"It's not what you say it is. It's what they say it is."

Why Branding Matters Now.

-
- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | People have too many choices and too little time. |
| 2 | Most offerings have similar quality and features. |
| 3 | We tend to base our buying choices on trust. |
-

"There are 1,349 cameras on the market. How do you decide which one to buy?"

Trust = reliability + delight. "Trust comes from meeting and beating customer expectations."

The Gap.

STRATEGIC THINKERS	CREATIVE THINKERS
Analytical	Intuitive
Logical	Emotional
Linear	Spatial
Numerical	Visual
Verbal	Physical

"When both sides work together, you can build a charismatic brand": one "for which people believe there's no substitute."

Discipline 1: Differentiate.

"Our brains act as filters to protect us from too much information." So: "We're hardwired to notice only what's different."

1900	1925	1950	2000
Features	Benefits	Experience	Identification
"What it is"	"What it does"	"What you feel"	"Who you are"

"Marketing today is about creating tribes." People join different tribes for different activities: driving, Volkswagen; reading, Amazon; sports, Nike. "On Sundays they worship Harley, god of the open road."

Focus, and the Focus Test.

The three most important words in differentiating a brand: focus, focus, focus.

THE FOCUS TEST	
1	Who are you?
2	What do you do?
3	Why does it matter?

"The most common reason for loss of focus is ill-considered brand extensions." Porsche with sports cars is focused; Porsche with sports cars and SUVs is not. OXO Good Grips got stronger with each extension, because each one reinforced its focus.

Discipline 2: Collaborate.

MODEL	HOW IT WORKS	HIS SCORECARD
One-stop shop	One firm holds every service needed to develop and steward the brand	Easy to manage, promise of consistency; little choice of teams, little ownership of the brand
Brand agency	A lead firm hires best-of-breed specialists	Choice of teams, promise of consistency; little ownership of the brand
Integrated marketing team	Managed inside the company, open collaboration among specialists	Choice of teams, consistency, ownership of the brand; difficult to manage

"It takes a village to build a brand." His model is a film: hundreds of collaborators, one set of credits.

Run both tests on your brief.

Davis. Read every line and ask "Can we build a campaign on that?" Answer with a reason. Cut what fails, even if it is true.

Davis. Is your audience a person described by behavior, or a job title?

Neumeier. Answer the focus test in one sentence each: Who are you? What do you do? Why does it matter?

Then. Finish the nineteen sections and turn the brief in on Blackboard by 2:50.

A design system, written as text.

What a .md file is, and DESIGN.md, a format for describing a visual identity to AI tools.

What a .md File Is.

A Markdown file is plain text with a few marks that mean formatting. It reads fine as it is, and any app that understands Markdown shows it formatted. John Gruber and Aaron Swartz made it in 2004 so people could write for the web without writing HTML.

WHAT YOU TYPE (FOCUS.MD)

```
# Focus
```

```
**Now:** the moodboard  
**Next hand-in:** Oct 7
```

```
## Stuck on  
- the second theme  
- a credit for image 4
```

```
[The brief](01-brief/creative-brief.md)
```

WHAT GITHUB SHOWS

Focus

Now: the moodboard

Next hand-in: Oct 7

Stuck on

- the second theme
- a credit for image 4

The brief

The Marks You Need.

TYPE THIS	YOU GET
# Title ## Section	Headings. The number of # marks is the level.
bold *italic*	bold and <i>italic</i>
- item	A bulleted list. 1. makes a numbered one.
[words](link)	A link. The link can be a web address or another file in the repo.
a b	A table, one row per line, cells split by bars.
-- - at the very top	Front matter: a block of labeled values a program can read before the text starts. DESIGN.md keeps its colors and type there.

Why Everything in the Repo Is Markdown.

People read it as is	No app needed. It is a text file that looks like notes.
AI tools read it natively	Language models read and write text. Headings give them the structure of a document without any layout to decode.
Git can show every change	Git compares text line by line, so each commit shows exactly which words changed. It cannot do that for a PDF or an image.
It outlives the tool	Any editor on any computer opens it, now and in twenty years.

DESIGN.md.

"A format specification for describing a visual identity to coding agents."

Published by Google Labs in April 2026, open source, and still marked alpha. It is one Markdown file that sits in a project and tells any AI tool how the product should look and why.

An agent that reads it before building a screen uses your colors, your type and your rules instead of its defaults.

Two Layers in One File.

1 · FRONT MATTER: EXACT VALUES A MACHINE READS

```
---
name: Heritage
colors:
  primary: "#1A1C1E"
  tertiary: "#B8422E"
  neutral: "#F7F5F2"
typography:
  h1:
    fontFamily: Public Sans
    fontSize: 3rem
---
```

2 · PROSE: WHY, AND HOW TO APPLY THEM

Colors

The palette is rooted in high-contrast neutrals and a single accent color.

- **Tertiary (#B8422E):** "Boston Clay", the sole driver for interaction.
- **Neutral (#F7F5F2):** Warm limestone foundation, softer than pure white.

"Tokens give agents exact values. Prose tells them *why* those values exist and how to apply them."

Why It Works: Intent Beats Values.

"The quality of a generated design is determined less by the precision of its values than by how clearly the intent is described."

ADJECTIVES	A SPECIFIC REFERENCE
"Modern, clean, trustworthy, premium"	"A 1970s graduate lecture handout in the tradition of an old and established university"
"Evokes nothing specific." The model makes something in the middle of what the words describe.	"Evokes a complete world": one ink, generous margins, a serif at reading size, no decoration.

"Adjectives describe a region. A specific reference describes a point."

What You Leave Out Defines the Character.

Naming a specific thing brings its limits with it. A model knows what a lecture handout is, and what it is not: it does not glow or use a gradient.

"Naming the object names them, the same way naming a dog tells the model that dogs don't meow."

Then add a short, intentional list of do's and don'ts. From their handout example:

Don't color the page numeral or any other piece of metadata. Vermilion lives in diagrams only.

Do keep vermilion inside diagrams. Its scarcity outside is what makes its presence inside meaningful.

A long, rambling list of don'ts "is often a sign the description was too vague."

New York City Transit Authority, 1970.



The binder
Ring-bound, so pages could be replaced.

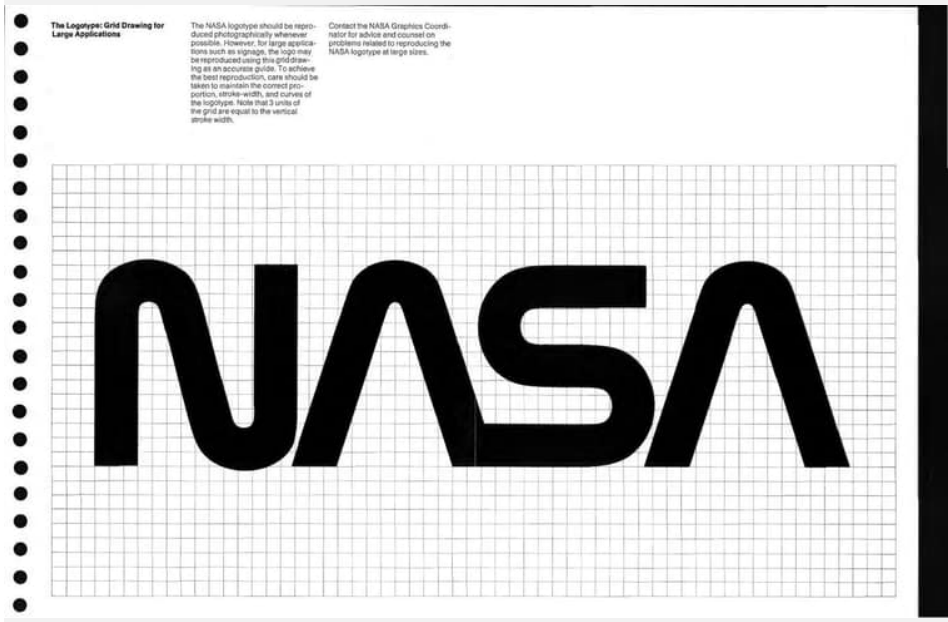


Route symbols
Every line gets the same circle, in the same type.



Signs, specified
Exit and Transfer, with arrows and route symbols.

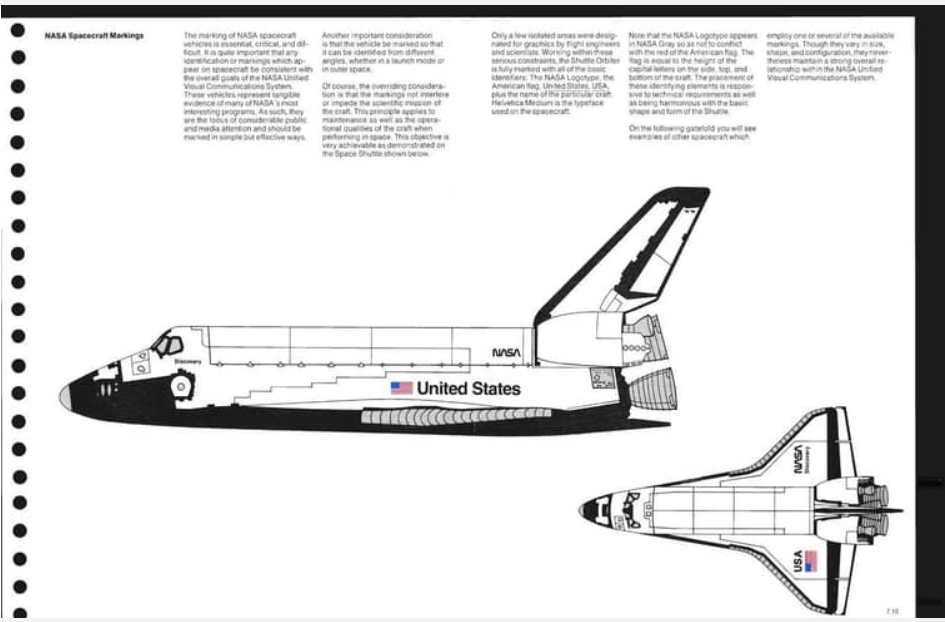
NASA, 1975.



The logotype on a grid
A grid drawing for large applications.



Two colors
NASA red and NASA warm gray, matched in any medium.



The Space Shuttle
Where the markings go on a spacecraft.

Designers Have Written This Document Before.

STANDARDS MANUAL

WHO IT WAS WRITTEN FOR

1970 · New York City Transit Authority Graphics Standards Manual

Unimark: Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda

Sign makers and crews who would never meet the designers, applying the system in hundreds of stations.

1975 · NASA Graphics Standards Manual

Danne and Blackburn

Every NASA center, printer and contractor using the worm logotype.

2026 · DESIGN.md

A model building screens for you. Same job: exact values, plus the reasons, so someone who never met you can apply the system.

In Practice.

PART	WHAT IT DOES
Eight sections, in order	Overview, Colors, Typography, Layout, Elevation and Depth, Shapes, Components, Do's and Don'ts. Any can be left out; the ones you keep stay in this order.
References	A value can point at another: a button's color is <code>{colors.tertiary}</code> , so changing the palette changes the button.
Lint	A checker finds broken references, missing colors and type, and text colors that fail contrast against their background.
Diff	Compares two versions of the file and reports which values changed.
Export	Turns the values into the W3C design token format or Tailwind, so code can use them directly.

Further Reading.

The spec and README	<code>github.com/google-labs-code/design.md</code>
Why it works, in their words	<code>github.com/google-labs-code/design.md/blob/main/PHILOSOPHY.md</code>
DESIGN.md files for real brands	<code>github.com/VoltAgent/awesome-design-md</code>
The token format it exports to	<code>designtokens.org</code> (W3C Design Tokens Community Group)
The file every AI tool reads first	<code>agents.md</code>
Markdown, from the source	<code>daringfireball.net/projects/markdown</code>

One project, one repo.

A template with a folder for every stage, and the rules any AI tool reads before it touches your work.

One Folder per Stage, in the Order You Reach It.

FOLDER	WHAT GOES IN IT	WHEN
ABOUT-ME.md	You: profile, how tools should work with you, your projects, your statement	Today, Dec 7
BRIEF.md	The working brief: problem, objective, context, questions	September
01-brief/	The creative brief, nineteen sections	Today
02-research/	Audiences, competitors, sources, interviews	All term
03-explorations/	Moodboard index with credits, themes, language	Oct 7, Oct 14
04-brand/ 05-tokens/	The direction, the rules, the voice; exact values for color, type, space	Oct 19 to Nov 4
06-book/ 07-site/	The brand book; the landing page, built from the tokens	Nov 16 to Dec 2
decks/ LOG.md	Every PDF, date first; what you decided and what the machine did	Every session

Where DESIGN.md Fits.

DESIGN.MD LAYER	IN YOUR REPO	STARTS
Front matter: values	05-tokens/: color, type and spacing in the W3C token format	Oct 21, Tokens and Rules
Prose: reasons and rules	04-brand/rules.md and voice.json	Oct 19 and Oct 26
Overview: the specific reference	Your direction, 04-brand/direction.md, drawn from the moodboard	Oct 19

AGENTS.md: the Rules Every Tool Reads First.

RULE	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU
The brief is the source	Every decision names the brief section it answers. The tool asks when nothing does.
The tool does not decide	No invented research, sources, customers or brand choices. It offers options; you pick.
Values come from the tokens	No color or size typed by hand anywhere else.
Copy is in your voice	The tool reads voice.json first, and only you edit it.
Say what the machine did	Every session with a tool ends with two lines in LOG.md.

Ask for the Job in Plain Words.

SKILL	WHAT IT DOES	SAY
write-in-voice	Reads your voice and brief before writing any copy	"Draft three taglines for the landing page."
check	Reads a draft against docs/CHECK.md and lists what to fix	"Check the tagline."
trace-to-brief	Shows which brief section each decision answers, and what answers nothing	"Does my moodboard answer the brief?"
log-the-run	Writes the LOG.md entry for the session	"Log this session."

AI Tools With Student Access.

TOOL	WHAT STUDENTS GET	SIGN UP
GitHub Student Developer Pack	Free GitHub Pro and Copilot Student for verified students, plus partner tools. Copilot Student sign-ups paused in April and reopened gradually from June.	education.github.com/pack
Google AI Pro (Gemini)	A free year for US college students 18 and over, with a school email. Claim by Dec 31, 2026; it bills \$19.99 a month after the year unless you cancel.	gemini.google/students
Figma Education	The Professional plan free for verified students, including Figma Make and monthly AI credits. Reverify each year.	figma.com/education
NotebookLM	Free. Load your readings and sources; it answers from those documents and cites them.	notebooklm.google.com
Claude	The free plan does not expire. No individual student discount; schools can join Claude for Education.	claude.ai · anthropic.com/education
Cursor	Free Hobby tier. Its free year of Pro for students closed to new sign-ups in June 2026.	cursor.com/students
Notion	Plus plan free with a school email.	notion.com/product/notion-for-education

Set up your repo.

1. Copy. On the template page, Use this template, then Create a new repository. Name it art418-lastname, set it to Private.

2. Clone. GitHub Desktop, File, Clone repository. On GitHub, Settings, Collaborators: add thehonestape.

3. Move in. Fill in ABOUT-ME.md, with your statement as its last section. BRIEF.md and LOG.md replace the templates. PDFs go to decks/, date first. Paste today's brief into 01-brief/creative-brief.md.

4. Commit. FOCUS.md in three lines, then one commit: "Move work into the starter repo". Push.

`github.com/workhorse/brand-project-starter`

Before October 7.

FILE	WHAT GOES IN IT	DUE
03-explorations/moodboard.md	Every image linked, credited, and tied to a brief section. Start with three before you leave.	Oct 7
03-explorations/themes.md	Two or three themes, each with its images and what it would cost	Oct 7
03-explorations/language.md	The first words the brand might use, and the ones it never would	Oct 7
LOG.md	Two lines for every session	Every session
Monday, Oct 5	Watch <i>Ways of Seeing</i> episode 2 before class	Oct 5

Close

Name a specific thing. Then write it down.

"Adjectives describe a region. A specific reference describes a point." DESIGN.md, PHILOSOPHY.md.