

Course Title: How to Think Like a Futurist: Improve Your Powers of Imagination, Invention, and Capacity for Change

Course Code: PDV 91

Instructor: Jane McGonigal

"In dealing with the future, it is far more important to be imaginative than to be right."

– Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*

Thinking about the far-off future isn't just an exercise in intellectual curiosity. It's a practical skill that, new research reveals, has a direct neurological link to greater creativity, empathy, and optimism. In other words, futurist thinking gives you the ability to create change in your own life and the world around you, today.

Each week you will have an assigned reading and a recommended practice opportunity.

Each week's reading will be 60 pages or less. Each practice opportunity is designed to take one hour or less. All practice is recommended, **not** required. I will respond in writing to any practice assignments that you choose to complete. (They can be submitted via Canvas.)

Weekly Outline:

Recommended pre-class reading:

A favorite saying of futurists is: "Get there early." As futurists, we think about things long before they start to happen.

Since our class is still in the future, this is the perfect opportunity for you to start getting there early. Before our first class meeting on 9/26, please read the following two essays:

- "What Future Studies Is, and Is Not" by Jim Dator
<http://tiny.cc/whatfuturestudiesis>
- "The Future is a Way of Life" by Marina Gorbis <http://tiny.cc/thefutureisawayoflife>

You'll notice that this syllabus includes quotes throughout for inspiration and provocation. After you've read these two essays, please send me a message on Canvas with the one sentence from each essay that stood out to you. (That is, please send me your favorite quote from each essay.)

Week one: Foundations of future thinking

"Any useful statement about the future should at first seem ridiculous." - Jim Dator, futurist.

This week is about powering up CREATIVITY. *Topics and activities for this meeting:*

Future orientation
When does the future begin?
Counter-factual memory (Skill #1)
Counter-factual futures (Skill #2)
Hard empathy (Skill #3)
Making the future vs. Predicting the future
Divergent thinking
Challenge professional futurists: What CAN'T be different?
The 2080 Census: The World as We (Don't) Know It

Assignment for next week:

Practice: Practice each skill (#1, #2, and #3) once, in writing. (*Note: All practice opportunities for this course are recommended, not required. I will respond in writing to all practices that are submitted to me on Canvas.)

Read: Introduction and Chapters 1-2 of *Inevitable* (60 pages)

Bonus readings to learn more about week one topics (not required): To be determined.

Week two: Playing with signals

"The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed yet."
- William Gibson, science fiction author

This week is about powering up IMAGINATION. *Topics and activities for this meeting:*

Choose your own future (The future of X)
What's a signal?
How to collect them
The future is a place where EVERYTHING can be different (an update on last week's challenge)
Combining signals into forecasts
Why ten-year forecasts, and why not five-year or fifty-year forecasts
The story of the Chinese Farmer (video)
A forecast from the year 2026: The future of working and learning
Positive imagination (Skill #4)
Shadow imagination (Skill #5)
Reading discussion

Assignment for next week:

Practice: Collect 2 signals and answer the key signals questions about them.

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365 Lasuen St. Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650

Read: Pick any two! Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 of *Inevitable*, your choice (~50 pages)

Bonus readings to learn more about week two topics (not required): To be determined.

Week three: Personal forecasting and autobiographical futures

“My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.”

- Charles Kettering, inventor

“The world has a you-shaped hole in it. In that way you are important. In that way you are called.”

- Tara Sophia Mohr, writer

This week is about powering up PERSONAL CHANGE. *Topics and activities for this meeting*:

How to ask: What would YOU do in this future?

Creativity boost! Personal divergent thinking

How to get practical ideas from autobiographical futures (Skill #6)

The psychology of future you (video)

Futures that change you

Connecting with your future self (Skill #7)

Reading discussion

Assignment for next week:

Practice: Please free-write (no editing or polishing required) a one-page journal entry for yourself, that begins: “It’s October 10, 2026....” What are you excited about today? What is your biggest worry? Who are you seeing? What are you doing for work? What are you doing for pleasure? What’s happening at home? Think about the age of yourself, and your loved ones, in 2026 as you write this, and what may have changed by then.

Read: “Why Imagine the Future” by Elise Boulding (2 pages), available online: <http://tiny.cc/whyimaginethefuture> (2 pages), AND

“Visioning and Future Studies” by Elise Boulding (2 pages), available online: <http://tiny.cc/visioning> , AND

“Some hints on writing preferred futures” by Jim Dator (2 pages), available online: <http://tiny.cc/somehints>

Pick any two! Chapters 7, 8, 9, and/or 10 of *Inevitable*, your choice (~50 pages)

Bonus readings to learn more about week three topics (not required): To be determined.

Week four: Storytelling and image-making about the future

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“The human capacity to create mental images of the ‘totally other’ - that which has never been experienced or recorded - is the key dynamic of history.”

– Elise Boulding, peace and conflict worker

“Possibilities are for visionaries and activists, probabilities are for spectators and consultants.”

– William Connolly, political scientist

This week is about powering up COMMUNICATION and INFLUENCE. *Topics and activities for this meeting:*

How to create Artifacts from the future (Skill #8)

Every story about the future starts the same way: “This is a world in which...”

How to design Preferred Futures (Skill #9)

Black Sky Thinking versus Blue Sky Thinking

Reading discussion

Assignment for next week:

Practice: Your final assignment is due: An original future of your own design, in written or artifact format. (See details below)

Read: “Bring on the EA-Rator and Collective Political Imagination” (~15 minutes to read), available online: <http://tiny.cc/bringon>

Bonus readings to learn more about week four topics (not required): To be determined.

Week five: Collective imagination

“Envisioning and making the future must be a massively public endeavor.”

– Marina Gorbis, futurist

This week is about powering up EMPATHY and SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE. *Topics and activities for this meeting:*

Reading discussion – Why collective imagination

Games are the most elevated form of investigation

Foresight boost: Massively multiple futures (Skill #10)

Foresight engines and how they work

Let’s play: The future of feeling

The six foresight strengths

Our future gallery (Optional sharing of final assignments)

Assignment for the future:

Congratulations! Even though the class is finished, keep going...

Read: If you are so inspired, finish *Inevitable*, Chapters 11-12 (25 pages)

Practice: Subscribe to the Institute for the Future's newsletter *News from the Future* at ifff.org/ifff-you/subscribe

Bonus readings on week five topics (not required):

Introduction and Chapter 14 in *Reality is Broken* by Jane McGonigal

"A world in which..." by Jamais Cascio, available online:

<http://tiny.cc/aworldinwhich>

Grade Options and Requirements:

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
 - This is the default option. Just come to class! No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass) will be determined as follows:
 - Attendance and participation 50%
 - Final assignment 50%
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
 - A passing grade (for "Credit") requires you to attend at least 4/5 class sessions and complete the final assignment

***Please Note:** *If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option.*

About the final assignment (for those taking the course for Credit or a Letter Grade):

As your final assignment, you will be asked to describe a future of your own design.

The format is your choice:

- A *preferred future* (a description of a specific future you would like to see come to pass, including potential actions we can take now to make it more likely, and actions that would make it less likely), OR
- An *autobiographical account of the future* (a personal story that explores what is different in a particular future, and how your daily life unfolds amidst those changes), OR
- An *artifact from the future* (a creative representation of an object that might exist in a particular future; it can be a physical object, an artwork, or just a detailed written description of an object that might exist in the future.)

We will practice each of these formats during the course so you will be familiar with them before undertaking your final assignment.

Written futures should be single-spaced, in a 10 or 12 point font, and 1-2 pages long. Artifacts can be presented in any format you wish and, if physical, will be returned to you.

Whichever format you choose, please be sure to label your future with the following information:

WHEN: What year is this future?

WHAT: What future does it explore? The future of X (food, sports, education, aging, storytelling, travel, religion, dating, the company you currently work for, whatever you are interested in!)

WHY: Which “inevitable” force is it most inspired by? (Cognifying, sharing, tracking, etc.)

Here are several examples :

WHEN: 2030

WHAT: The future of the marathon running

WHY: Accessing

WHEN: 2026

WHAT: The future of Halloween

WHY: Flowing

WHEN: 2036

WHAT: The future of climate change refugees voting

WHY: Sharing

WHEN: 2021

WHAT: The future of presidential

WHY: Interacting

WHEN: 2026

WHAT: The future of Telegraph Ave in Berkeley

WHY: Tracking

WHEN: 2030

WHAT: The future of dogs

WHY: Filtering

* * *

“I go to scale the Future's possibilities! Farewell!”

– HENRIK IBSEN, playwright

Don't stop while you're ahead... here are some recommended resources to help you continue to imagine (and invent) the future.

The Institute for the Future: iff.org

“The Thing from the Future” situationlab.org/projects/the-thing-from-the-future/

Black Mirror television series netflix.com/title/70264888

What If? Book by Randall Munroe

The Imagination Institute: imagination-institute.org

Open the Future: openthefuture.com

The Skeptical Futuryst: futuryst.blogspot.com

Open Futures Scenario Database: openfutures.net/

School for the Future of Innovation in Society at ASU: sfis.asu.edu

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Manoa School of Futures Studies: futures.hawaii.edu
“Found” Artifacts from the Future series: archive.wired.com/wired/issue/found
The Long Now Foundation: longnow.org

If you'd like to stay involved with futures thinking, subscribe to the Institute for the Future's newsletter *News from the Future*: ifff.org/ifff-you/subscribe , visit our public gallery at 201 Hamilton Avenue in Palo Alto, and join us at our public talks and events.