Lettermark
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Armin Hofmann assigned this project at the Basel School of Design when I was a graduate student there. I found it to be a challenging and rewarding learning experience, so I passed it along to my beginning students when I started teaching. Most beginning students take the alphabet and its individual letterforms for granted. This project requires that they examine the characteristic shape and structure of the two letters in their initials and determine how the two forms can be integrated into a unified whole to create a mark in which each letter is integral to the other. It demands attention to all of the details of letterform design, including stroke, weight and contrast, serif style, case, and especially positive and negative space. Using a student's initials allows it to be personal, and if it is well designed, the mark can be used later in the student's stationery layout.

Assignment Brief
Focusing on contrast and figure/ground relationship (positive and negative shapes), design a visually interesting logotype that integrates the initials of your first and last names (two letters) into a unified whole. The letters should be based initially on these five typefaces: Garamond, Baskerville, Bodoni, Century Expanded, and Helvetica. The lettermark must contain curves and the letters must "read" in consecutive order: first initial first, then the last initial. You may incorporate either serif or sans serif, uppercase or lowercase, roman or italic, condensed or expanded, bold or light, or a combination of any two.

Sketches are to be done using various black markers (sixty minimum—six to a page, ten pages). French curve, T-square, triangles, circle template, and technical pens must be used to ink the final art on a high-quality hot press illustration board or Mylar. The final design should measure 10" in height on 15" x 20" hot press illustration board, such as Letramax 2000. The width of the logotype will vary based on your design.

Objectives
The purpose of this assignment is to offer students an opportunity to understand the demands of developing and executing a mark that is based on letterforms and incorporates curves. Students learn about the structure of certain letterforms and type styles as they research and study existing typefaces, as well as other marks that incorporate letters. This project will also provide an opportunity to improve necessary design and technical skills as ideas are carried from the early sketch stage to the final color presentation comprehensive and camera-ready art.
Critiques

A variety of lettermark designs are included here to demonstrate the range of solutions. Since these projects have been collected over a series of semesters, the students were not readily available to offer their comments. However, as a result of suggestions from students, as well as my observations of their work and their reactions to the project, I have modified the assignment over time to improve the learning experience. For example, I assign a specific number of sketches because students never do enough on their own and thus limit their potential for developing more unique solutions. To complement the star project, which I assign first and which only allows straight lines to be used, I require the lettermark solution to include curves. Students are introduced to curve-making tools and engage in exercises to help them learn how to work with these tools.

If your graphic design curriculum does not include letterform design, instructors need to demonstrate methods of constructing letterforms. Historical reference and research materials, such as the Albrecht Dürer diagrams, are helpful and ensure that students maintain the structural integrity of the letters. The exercises also offer experience with constructing the forms, particularly with transitions from straight strokes into curves.

Some observations for teaching this project: Beginning students should avoid sketching with a pencil since it displays the design in gray, not black, and minimizes the contrast between positive and negative shapes. Encourage students to explore a wide range of possibilities and to develop their ideas. Experimentation is important. Try the two forms in different relationships: one above the other, one below the other, side by side, and overlapping. Explore one letter as a positive shape and the other as a negative shape. Examine the parts that make up the letters. What parts are necessary for recognition of the letter and what parts can be defined with implied line and shape?