

1. SAVE ANYTHING THAT INSPIRES YOU.

You can go into every assignment or project blind, or you can have a wealth of inspirational materials at your disposal. Try this: every time you see something that you envy (wish you'd done), admire, covet etc. save it. If you find something amazing online, download it and put it in a folder on your computer. I find it helpful to have folders devoted to print, websites and videos.

Don't just bookmark cool websites. Websites change all the time. Bookmark them, but take a screen capture of a good design as well. MacOSX comes with the program "Grab", or you can purchase "Snapz Pro". For Windows you can use the "Print Screen" key or purchase "Capture".

You can start a physical binder filled with magazine tear-outs that inspire you, or save entire issues of magazines. Use clear plastic binder sheets to hold collected magazine pieces. (Alternately, paste them into a sketchbook.)

The more organized your inspiration is, the better you'll be able to jog your mind for ideas when you need them. You'll be able to go straight to your folder of "package designs" for example.

Creating a bulletin board of inspiration can also work very well.

2. TAKE A HIKE

I.E. A really good reason not to put projects off until the last minute. When you are stalled, one of the worst things you can do is sit there and stew. Take a nap, take a walk, or stand on your head. Blood flow is good, rest is good. You want to stimulate your mind and allow your unconscious to work away at a problem.

Many smart companies have realized how useful movement can be to idea generation and installed ping-pong and foosball tables, athletic facilities, etc.

Sometimes a simple change of scenery can help... moving yourself to a different lab, working in a coffee shop, etc.

3. BUY A NOTEBOOK

Ideas come at weird times. You don't want to lose an idea just because you were in your car driving and didn't have a pencil. Tape recorders help as well. (There's a tape recorder attachment available for iPods.)

4. LISTEN TO MUSIC

For many people, music cuts straight to the creative center of the brain, stimulating it and producing an incredible rush of inspiration. You may or may not be one of them.

5. GET TO THE HEART OF IT

Design is about communication. You need to understand the essence of what you're designing about before you can pull together a successful concept. If you can't ask someone outright (or if it's a project you chose) try making lists of words / terms that represent what you want to communicate in your design. Your design should be consistent aesthetically with what you are trying to convey (the style should match the message) or you're going to confuse your audience. You should always be able to quickly describe what your "product" is.

6. SKETCH

Oh, I know, you hate it. Why does everyone hate sketching so much? Some people link it to their (lack of) drawing skills, some people think it slows them down. The problem with jumping into software when you first have an idea, is that it may not be your best idea, it may not be well thought out. This can lead to frustration and a need to go "back to the drawing board" anyway. By creating mockups (which designers in professional settings have to do, so it's good to get into the habit), you give yourself more time to really develop your concept. It doesn't matter if anyone else can decipher your sketches, for now.

p.s. If you haven't read "MTIV: Process, Inspiration, and Practice for the New Media Designer", by Hilman Curtis get yourself a copy. It's a book that transcends design, because everyone needs to be able to generate ideas.