

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

Course website: canvas.stanford.edu

“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, futures 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 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.)

Book list:

Required: *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces that Will Shape Our Future* by Kevin Kelly

Recommended: *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* by Rebecca Solnit

Recommended: *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* by Jane McGonigal

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 9/26, please read the following two essays:

- "What Future Studies Is, and Is Not" by Jim Dator <http://tiny.cc/whatfuturestudiesis>
- "The Future as 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 with the one sentence from each essay that stood out to you. (That is, please send me your favorite quote from each essay.) I'll collect and share these on the course website.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St. Stanford, CA 94305
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Weekly Outline:

9/26 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 foresight (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. (*Reminder: All practice opportunities for this course are recommended, not required. I will respond in writing to all practices that are posted on Canvas.)

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

Super-excited about this week's topic? Bonus readings!!!

"The Angel of Alternate History" by Rebecca Solnit (3 pages, in recommended book *Hope in the Dark*)

A collection of scientific papers on this week's topic are linked to on the course website, including: "Fit Between Future Thinking and Future Orientation on Creative Imagination", "Counterfactual thinking: an fMRI study on changing the past for a better future", and "Is there a core neural network in empathy?"

10/3 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 (a.k.a “The future of X”)

What’s a signal?

How to collect signals (Skill #4)

The future is a place where EVERYTHING can be different (an update on last week’s challenge)

Combining signals into forecasts (Skill #5)

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 #6)

Shadow imagination (Skill #7)

Reading discussion

Assignment for next week:

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

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

Super-excited about this week’s topic? Bonus readings!!!

“Six Rules for Effective Forecasting” by Paul Saffo, <http://tiny.cc/socialinventor>

“Society as a Social Invention and You as a Social Inventor” by Jim Dator,
<http://tiny.cc/sixrules>

“Grounds for Hope” and “Looking into Darkness” by Rebecca Solnit (21 pages, in recommended book *Hope in the Dark*)

A collection of ten-year forecasts from the Institute for the Future are available at:
<http://tiny.cc/tenyear>

A collection of scientific papers on this week’s topic are linked to on the course website, including: “Desirable and undesirable futures call for different scene construction processes.”

10/10 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 future 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 #8)
The psychology of future you (video)
Futures that change you
Connecting with your future self (Skill #9)
Reading discussion

Assignment for next week:

Practice: Please free-write (no editing or polishing required) a short 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. You can use the “Learning Ledger” future as a creative prompt if that helps! (see learningisearning.com)

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)

Super-excited about this week’s topic? Bonus readings!!!

A collection of scientific papers on this week’s topic are linked to on the course website, including: “When does the future begin? A study in maximizing motivation”, “Time metrics matter: Connecting present and future selves”, and “Become more optimistic by imagining a best possible self.”

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10/17 Week four: Storytelling and image-making about the future

“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 **INFLUENCE**.

Topics and activities for this meeting:

How to create Artifacts from the future (Skill #10)

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

How to design Preferred Futures (Skill #11)

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>

“What if everyone on Earth jumped at the same time?” and “What if everyone actually only had one soulmate?” (~15 minutes to read, check course website)

Bring your laptop and/or fully charged smart phone to next week’s class!!!

Super-excited about this week’s topic? Bonus readings!!!

“Six Artifacts from the Future”: <http://tiny.cc/sixartifacts>

“Wanted: Professors of Foresight” by H.G. Wells <http://tiny.cc/wantedprofessors>

Introduction to *Reality is Broken* (recommended book)

10/24 Week five: Collective imagination

“The future is dark, which on the whole, is the best thing the future can be, I think.” – Virginia Woolf, writer

*“Envisioning and making the future must be a massively public endeavor.”
– Marina Gorbis, futurist*

This week is about powering up **EMPATHY** and **SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE**.
****PLEASE BRING A LAPTOP OR FULLY CHARGED SMART PHONE TO THIS MEETING.**

Topics and activities for this meeting:

Games are the most elevated form of investigation
Reading discussion – Why collective imagination
Playing “What if?”, or the power of hypothetical questions
Foresight boost: Massively multiple futures (Skill #12)
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 iftf.org/iftf-you/subscribe

Super-excited about this week’s topic? Bonus readings!!!

Chapter 14 in *Reality is Broken* by Jane McGonigal

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

<http://tiny.cc/aworldinwhich>

“Viagra for Caribou” by Rebecca Solnit (4 pages, in *Hope in the Dark*)

Grade Options and Requirements:

- 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
- No Grade Requested (NGR)
 - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.

**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:

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, storytelling, travel, religion, parenting, 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.)

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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
WHY: Sharing

WHEN: 2021
WHAT: The future of U.S.
presidential voting
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.

Institute for the Future: iftf.org

"The Thing from the Future" Game: situationlab.org/projects/the-thing-from-the-future/

Black Mirror television series: netflix.com/title/70264888

The Nature of the Future Book by Marina Gorbis

The Imagination Institute: imagination-institute.org

Open the Future: openthefuture.com

The Skeptical Futuryst: futuyst.blogspot.com

Open Futures Scenario Database: openfutures.net/

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

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*: iftf.org/iftf-you/subscribe, visit our public gallery at 201 Hamilton Avenue in Palo Alto, and join us at our public talks and events.

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