
Building and Testing Initial Ideas

(Human Centered Design)

February 3, 2026



Assignment 1 Reminder

The Researcher's Journal

- » Due February 5 at 1PM
 - » Uses your system observation
- 
- » Complete your observation before our next class (Feb. 3)

Assignment

Your first "major" social venture assignment is due before class (i.e., by 1PM) on February 5. The instructions are provided below, as well as on the [Assignment page where you will upload your submission.](#)

Assignment 1: The Researcher's Journal

Objective:

This assignment is designed to train you as a social entrepreneur: to see the world around you, connect personal observations to broader systemic issues, and ground your analysis in both evidence and empathy. Your goal is to move from a personal experience to a well-defined social problem, preparing you for the semester-long venture project. An AI can be a useful tool for brainstorming or editing, but it cannot complete this assignment for you, as it requires your unique observations, experiences, and reflections.

Tasks:

Part 1: The Origin Story (Your "Why")

- **Task:** Tell a brief but detailed story (1-2 paragraphs) about a specific moment or personal observation that made you aware of a larger social problem. This could be something you saw in your community, a story from a friend or family member, an experience from a job, or a frustration from your own life. Describe the event with specific details.
- **Connection:** After telling the story, explicitly state the broader "wicked problem" this personal moment connects to (e.g., educational inequity, lack of accessible mental healthcare, etc.).

Part 2: The Observable Problem (Your "Where" and "Who")

- **Task:** Identify a specific physical location you can visit (e.g., a specific park, a campus building, a local intersection, a coffee shop) or a niche online community you can observe where an instance of your problem occurs.
- **First-Person Observation:** Your primary evidence for this problem must be a direct, first-person observation from visiting this place (physically or digitally). What did you see, hear, or feel that demonstrated the problem?
- **Problem Statement:** Based on your observation, write a single, clear sentence that defines the observable problem. (e.g., "During peak hours, students in wheelchairs have difficulty navigating the crowded main entrance of the campus library due to the lack of a clear, protected access lane.")

Part 3: The System Map & Conceptual Connection

- **Task 1 [System Map]:** Briefly map the system around your observable problem. Identify the key Actors (people/organizations), Rules (laws, policies, social norms), and Resources (money, technology, community trust).
- **Task 2 [Conceptual Connection]:** Review the "Leverage Points" reading by Donella Meadows. In a dedicated paragraph, answer the following: Which of Meadows' leverage points seems most relevant to the system you've just mapped? You must quote at least one specific phrase from the text and explain how it connects to a specific detail from your own system map.

Part 4: Stakeholder Perspective-Taking (Empathy)

- **Task:** From your system map, choose the two most critical stakeholders (they do not have to be the most powerful). For each stakeholder, write a short paragraph (3-4 sentences) from their first-person perspective ("I am..."). Describe how they experience the problem, what they are worried about, and what they want. Try to use language you think they would actually use.
- **Conflict/Tension:** After writing the two perspectives, add a final paragraph that explains where and why the needs or desires of these two stakeholders might conflict.

Format:

A professional 2-3 page memo [submitted as a Word document or PDF to Canvas.](#)

Learning Objectives for Today

1. Generate multiple solution ideas for a defined social problem
 2. Identify the core assumptions behind a venture concept
 3. Use a pre-mortem to surface failure risks
 4. Turn risks into near-term tests and actions
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Warm-Up: Divergent Solutions

Write 3 to 5 distinct solution ideas for your problem

In small groups, share and build on each other's ideas



Warm-Up: Reflecting on Ideas

- » Which idea feels most different from your first instinct?
 - » Which idea seems easiest to test quickly?
 - » What would make one idea clearly better than the rest?
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Idea vs. Testable Hypothesis

Idea

- » A possible solution direction

Hypothesis

- » A claim you can test with evidence

Assumptions

- » The hidden “bets” behind an idea
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Core Assumptions Checklist

Need

- » The target group has a real, urgent problem

Behavior

- » They will use or adopt the solution

Feasibility

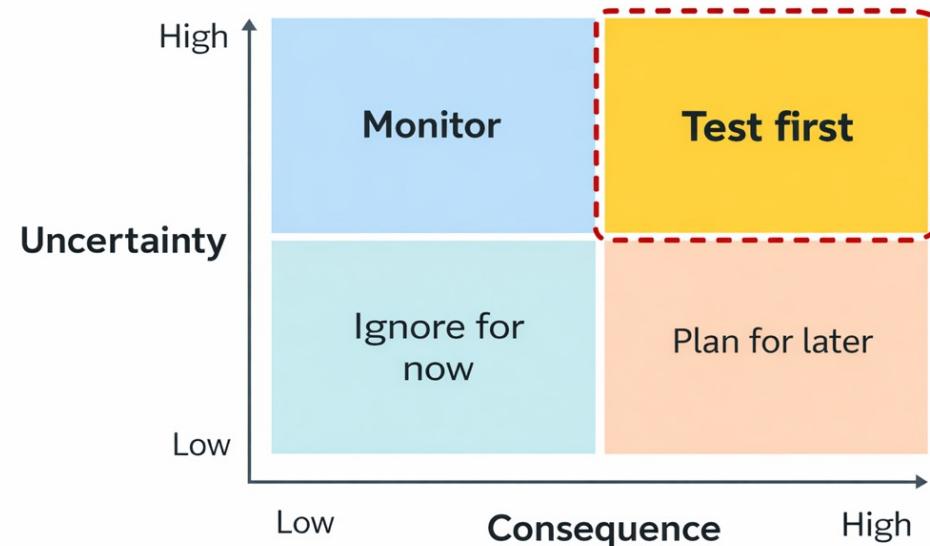
- » You can deliver it with available resources

Impact

- » The solution would actually improve outcomes
-

Example Early Testing Options

- » Paper prototype or sketch
 - » One-page landing page or mockup
 - » Short interviews or observation
 - » Simple surveys with real tradeoffs
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Designing an Experiment

(Using IDEO's Prototype Plan)

- » IDEO Model:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30GMJH2Wy-8>



Pre-Mortem

1. Assume the venture failed
2. Ask: what went wrong and why?



How does this help?

Use the insights to reduce risk early

Activity: AI as Devil's Advocate

Use AI as a critical opponent to expose risks

PROMPT

I am developing a social venture to address **[problem]** by **[venture concept]**. Act as a highly critical, skeptical VC or experienced social entrepreneur. Identify every possible way this venture could fail or cause unintended negative consequences. Be brutal, specific, and creative. List at least 10 distinct failure scenarios or significant risks.

Activity: Human Value-Add

Analyze the critique

- » Pick 3 to 5 risks you did not think of
 - » Choose the single most personally worrisome risk
 - » Define one concrete de-risking action for the next 1 to 2 weeks
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Activity Debrief

- » What was the most surprising risk the AI raised?
 - » How did failure thinking strengthen your idea?
 - » What will you test first and why?
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Connection to The Founder's Memo

Next class + Assignment 2

- » Pre-mortem feeds the **Personal Risk and Mitigation Plan** section
 - » A strong proposal shows awareness of assumptions and a test plan
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Assignment 2: The Founder's Memo

Due at 1PM on February 10

Assignment 2: The Founder's Memo

Objective:

This assignment challenges you to move from analysis to creation. You will synthesize your personal observations and system analysis from Assignment 1 into a coherent proposal for an initial social venture. This memo should serve as a foundational document for your idea, grounded in your unique perspective and demonstrating a thoughtful consideration of risks and relationships.

Tasks:

1. Grounding the Problem: A Refined Statement

Task: Begin your memo with a concise, refined problem statement. This section must directly connect to your work from Assignment 1 by briefly quoting or paraphrasing your "Personal Origin Story" and your "First-Person Observation." This serves as the "why" behind your venture and anchors your proposal in your unique journey.

2. The Venture Concept & Value Proposition

- **Task (Venture Concept):** Clearly describe your initial social venture idea. What is it? What are its core activities?
- **Task (Value Proposition & Connection to Empathy):** Clearly state the value your venture provides to its primary beneficiaries. Crucially, you must then answer: "Based on the 'Stakeholder Perspective-Taking' exercise in Assignment 1, why do you believe this value proposition will resonate with your target community?" Connect your proposed solution directly to the empathetic understanding you developed.

3. Personal Risk & Mitigation Plan

- **Task (Pre-Mortem):** Based on your pre-mortem brainstorming, identify the single most personally worrisome risk to your venture's success. This should be the risk that you, as the founder, feel least equipped to handle or that feels most threatening.
- **Task (Reflection & Action):** In a dedicated paragraph, explain why this risk is personally concerning to you (e.g., does it relate to a personal bias, a skill gap, a fear?). Then, propose one concrete action you will take during your field research (Assignment 3) to begin investigating or mitigating this specific risk.

4. Stakeholder Landscape & Power Dynamics

- **Task (Visual Map):** Create a simple visual diagram (a "stakeholder map") that shows at least 5-7 key stakeholders and illustrates the relationships between them (e.g., with lines labeled "funding," "regulation," "formal partnership," "community trust," "tension," etc.).
- **Task (Reflection on Power):** Below your map, write a reflective paragraph that answers the following questions: "Based on your map, who holds the most power in this system, and who is the most marginalized? How might your own position, identity, and biases influence how you perceive and interact with these different stakeholders?"

Format:

A professional 3-5 page proposal submitted as a Word document or PDF to Canvas. You should include your visual stakeholder map as an image within the document.

Next Class: Venture Concept Workshop

- » Bring your:
 - » Strongest concept
 - » Top assumption
- » Come ready to work!

