

## Types of Prototypes

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This document is intended as a resource for people who are curious about how prototyping or "remaking" source materials intersects with the praxis of literary and textual criticism. It lists types of prototypes and explains what they help us to better understand. Next, it describes how prototyping is, or may be, a form of criticism. And finally, it explains how prototypes "address us." I've used the language of "source materials," but perhaps you prefer "texts" or the like.

Types of prototypes (not exhaustive), and why you might try them:

- *Imitation* (labour of source material): to better understand the composition of source material by learning the techniques involved in its production
- *Forgery* (economy of source material): to better understand the public perception and/or value of source material by learning the techniques involved in its production, but with intent to either deceive or reveal deception
- *Scenario* (interaction with source material): to better understand how people may ultimately interpret source material by situating it in contexts of use and then observing those uses
- *Story* (performance of source material): to better understand how source material gains cultural traction or builds identity by treating it as a script and performing it on or off record
- *Counterfactual* (norms or conditions of source material): to better understand the biases of source material (or common interpretations of it) by constructing "what-if" alternatives to specific aspects of its history, content, or composition
- *Model* (logic or conventions of source material): to better understand the mode, form, genre, scale, or design of source material by rendering it as an abstraction, using it to alter other source materials (or aspects of itself), and determining why the changes are interesting (if at all)
- *Wish* (ideology of source material): to better understand the worldviews, belief systems, or desires of source material by increasing/decreasing their frequency, reversing them, or otherwise manipulating them and then determining why the changes are interesting (if at all)

Prototyping may be considered a form of criticism that:

- Performs a method or physically *manifests a way of reading* through techniques such as imitation, alteration, scripting, repetition, simulation, recontextualization, modelling, counterfactuals, ruination, and trial-and-error testing, to name a few.
- Is interpreted or assessed based on its *effectiveness as an experiment*, or how persuasively it changes or isolates the systems through which materials and contexts afford meaning. Such systems may include matters of perception (e.g., how materials are seen or engaged), semantics (e.g., how signifiers relate and produce meaning), aesthetics (e.g., how materials are arranged and composed), politics (e.g., how

materials enable or are embedded in ideologies), history (e.g., how materials are anchored in time and space but also move across them), matter (e.g., the stuff of which materials are made), and want or need (e.g., wishes, desires, uses, and applications).

- Expresses a form or model, which foregrounds use and *prompts specific actions*. Such actions may include writing in a margin or blank space, entering data, replying to a message, fixing a bug, following steps, signing, clicking, copying, pasting, deleting, scanning, redacting, searching, tagging, spamming, non-communication (e.g., in the case of frustration, silence, or confusion), or simply listening, watching, or reading. The consequences of these actions are not always predictable. In fact, the most persuasive prototypes foster surprise.
- Articulates language and meaning with matter. While prototypes are conceptual, they demonstrate (as opposed to re-present) how concepts *work through materials* and settings.
- Suggests or conjectures something instead of proving it. That is, a prototype is a *situation for interpretation*, not a standalone object. Meaning is an effect of experimentation, not an ingredient of it.
- Imagines a solution or *scenario* to examine the results. Such scenarios may include improving features of source material, stewarding it into the present, remediating it, remaking it, repairing it, or (to demonstrate why it was persuasive in the first place) ruining it. Any of these practices may experiment with alternate histories, probable futures, adjacent possibilities, or absences in the archive.
- Often uses *ephemerality as a medium*. That is, it tends to be more interested in what escapes than what persists. Here, we may consider how interactions, interfaces, performances, rhythms, impressions, feelings, and affects escape the record or are difficult to “capture” with technologies. Put this way, loss is not necessarily an anxiety or emphasis. Change becomes the most interesting or suggestive element of creativity and criticism.

Prototyping also asks how source materials address us (see [Mitchell](#)):

- Source materials function as public documents, intended for passersby. Here, negative space, lines, typefaces, and font sizes are especially important (e.g., graphic design). The material *wants your attention*. It is charged. It is read from a distance.
- Source materials become symbols, intended for extended observation. Here, the form or “face” across components is key (e.g., topography). The material *wants to escape reality*. It welds feeling with arrangement, against the reduction of signs to mere vehicles for meaning.
- Source materials manifest ways of reading, intended for familiarization or defamiliarization. Here, orientation, embodiment, and eye movement are most significant (e.g., interface design). The material *wants to afford certain readings*. It influences or even structures vision.
- Source materials create relations with other materials, intended for the production or analysis of patterns. Here, juxtaposition and reference are central (e.g., interaction design). The material *wants to be an index*, with readers traversing across (or toggling between) it and something else. It connects.

- Source materials are proof, intended as evidence. Here, the truth claims are emphasized (e.g., forensics). The material *wants to be a record*. It is like a photograph or signature. It points or demonstrates.
- Source materials are objects or commodities, intended for collection and exhibition. Here, the value, availability, and economy of materials are privileged (e.g., book arts). The material *wants to be displayed*. People travel to witness the original. Something about it cannot be copied.
- Source materials are scans, intended primarily for access on screen. Here, recognition, formats, and relations between witnesses, editions, originals, and copies are the focus (e.g., versioning). The material *wants to be found or archived*. It is its legibility.
- Source materials are edges, intended to produce boundaries. Here, page size, margins, paper, screens, and canvases matter (e.g., layout design). The material *wants to frame language and reading*. It demarcates.
- Source materials are windows or portals, intended for transparency. Here, clarity is everything (e.g., instrumental design). The material *gives people what they want or expect*. It is a vehicle for exchange.
- Source materials are mirrors, intended for reflection or re-presentation. Here, a lack of ornament, a use of familiar features, and an insistence on accuracy of perspective are significant (e.g., isomorphic design). The material *wants to express the world precisely and/or prompt awareness* (or social- or self-awareness). It hails.
- Source materials are tactile, intended for handling and touching. Here, texture is paramount (e.g., materials design). The material *wants to be tangible*, or it does not want to be behind glass or screen. It exposes the limits of vision and ocularcentrism.
- Source materials are processes, intended to resist alienation or abstraction. Here, composition, traces of interaction, gradual change, and the time spent making, reproducing, preserving, and disposing are most important (e.g., labour studies). The material *wants to be a verb*. It is mutable. It decays, rots, morphs, grows. It is also linked to various “invisible” contributors and acts of production.
- Source materials are dogma, intended for followers. Here, lists, point form, and order are foregrounded (e.g., litany). The material *wants to be copied*, distributed, consulted, and observed. It directs or guides.
- Source materials are policy or law, intended for nations, citizens, or employees. Here, an absence of aesthetics, a lack of variation, or an assertion of consistency is crucial (e.g., protocol). The material does not want to be an image. It *wants to be code or procedure*, with a standard. It is executable.