

# On Paper

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## **Part One: Proposal**

Throughout this class, we approached a plethora of bioregional texts to investigate how the arts and humanities can contribute to watershed management. We combed through texts across centuries, each describing landscapes I have not seen with lush description, sometimes landscapes that no one can see anymore, across hundreds of pages. Pages, we so quickly forget, that were once part of these landscapes. Each sheet, stitched into a form that we humans can understand, has been pulled from the roots of the wilds to let us explain to ourselves the nature of wilderness. The history of environmentalism is ironically self-centered – we take from the environment to explain why the environment is worth preserving for human reasons, not for the unspoken solemnity of existence that the ferns and pines seem to enjoy. To my mind, then, the best thing that writers and artists can do to contribute to these discussions of preservation is to take responsibility for the role they already play. Something to promote awareness of the materials that they and everyone else regularly interact with, both to create and absorb the creations of others. It is so easy in the modern day to forget the origins of the materials we handle, but a piece that acknowledges the origins of our tools and the impact they have on the world around us might inspire a broader awareness of their presence in everyday life.

I propose a pamphlet entitled *On Paper*, a dual-meaning designed both to bluntly introduce the topic and to bring awareness to the material this very work will be printed upon – inducing in microcosm the kind of awareness the writing will attempt to expand into wide-scale understanding. Structurally, there are lots of different possibilities for what to include – a few of

which I have drafted for your appraisal – ranging from the history of papermaking, to the influences of environment upon the quality of paper, to the artistic willingness to ignore the tools of the trade (and by extension, the wider social willingness to ignore them as well). This pamphlet would offer not so much a call to action and more an invitation to join in the recognition of what is already around us and to contribute to that environment. As it turns out, making recycled paper is fairly simple, and with the abundance of printed materials we encounter by simply living in the modern world, including the very pamphlet held in the hand of the reader, it would be the most fitting capstone to give the reader the knowledge necessary to return these printed materials into the cycle of creation.

On the subject of distribution, I suggest this pamphlet to be distributed in locations around West Branch associated with print in some way. I initially considered the Black Rose bookshop, but unfortunately the closing of its physical location has removed that option. The next best option could be the Hoover Presidential Library, as a place both significant to West Branch and to printmaking/archival records. I could also see the pamphlet function well in smaller, more common locations, like post offices, or even included in local newspapers. The specifics of execution, I think, are best left to those considering the project, so I leave it to your discretion to consider where this project would fit best into the West Branch community.

Regardless of the viability of this project, I would be remiss to introduce it before you without also introducing the one who taught me much of what I now know about papermaking. While I was doing research on papermaking, I reached out to Nicholas Cladis, an adjunct assistant professor here at the University's Center for the Book. Nick was kind enough to show me around his class, talk about his six years of studying Japanese papermaking techniques, and his various endeavors to make papermaking more sustainable and accessible. During his time

with the University, he has started a local garden specifically for plants that can be made into paper fibers and various dyes, and when I talked to him, he expressed an interest in getting the wider community aware of and interested in the paper making process. So, even if this proposal fails to pique your interest, if any part of this concept feels like it could be valuable, I would highly recommend reaching out to him. Thank you for the consideration, and if there is anything I can do to elaborate upon this idea, please feel free to reach out to me!

## **Part Two: Pamphlet Drafts**

*Intro:* The paper you hold in your hands, right now, used to be alive. The reams that rest in your printer once coated a riverbank in foliage. Every day, you walk through a world of reincarnate nature, bound in print at the library, the bookstore, the post office. And on some level, that's okay. Great, even. Paper is such a useful tool that allows us to create and share information both practical and poetic between each other. This is not an inditement of papermaking as a practice. It is a call to awareness about the literal roots of the most pervasive archival and artistic tool in our culture, and a celebration of it as an artform.

*Potential Segment - Poetic/Philosophical:* There's something deeply ironic about art and its relationship to the environment. As far back as can be traced, the natural world has been a fascination of the arts, from the cave-paintings of herds of beasts into the age of print. The works of great environmentalists like John Muir and Alexander von Humboldt describe at great length the natural beauty of distant landscapes, collected in great anthologies of print. But each page of those great volumes was once a facet of those breathtaking vistas. Perhaps, because we cannot see through the perspective of the plants, we prioritize our own and feel the need to impress them upon the land and each other. We draw images of nature on nature itself; we inscribe lavish descriptions of the land on materials that knew it more intimately than us. And while the

distribution of these pieces of visual and literary art have shaped how we as a species think about our environment, a thought towards the surface on which they were written could enhance those ideas even more in our present age.

*Potential Segment – Local/Regional:* Not all paper is the result of grand, aged oaks, though. On the local level, there are papermaking efforts using fibrous plants native to Iowa. Hemp, milkweed, and even corn stalks can be used to make paper. Some farms cooperate with the University of Iowa's Center for the Book to contribute some of these plants for papermaking classes. There are also efforts to use papermaking as a means for conservation efforts, gathering invasive species and repurposing them into more useful materials. When viewed as a material inherently tied with nature, paper and the process of its creation can be a powerful thought among many working together towards a world entwined with the land.

*Potential Segment – The Process:* The natural world is not only present in the growth of paper's material – it is present throughout the process and shapes its final ability. This is most present in the water; after the fibrous bark is peeled away from the stalks and gathered together, it is extensively soaked in water. The quality of this water is paramount to the ability of the fibers to bond into sheets – alkaline water is a necessity, with more acidic waters degrading the fibers as they soak. Similarly, water saturated with iron or nitrates, like that of the Iowa and Cedar rivers and their tributaries, can result in yellowing and increased damage over time. Even after it is removed from the ground, paper still changes and is changed by the environment surrounding it – perhaps the reason why people find it such a meaningful tool for artistic expression.

*Conclusion – What You Can Do:* All of this, now rests in your hands. This humble piece of paper has travelled far and changed much, but it nevertheless remains connected to the natural environment through its history, the same way we are ourselves connected to places near and far

from us. If this has resonated with you in any way, I strongly encourage you to not only see the natural sources of the common paper in everyday life but to also engage in the process. Many common, widely distributed plants can be grown and harvested to make paper fibers or dyes. Given what you have at hand at this moment, you can always make your own paper. It's a simple, low-cost project that recycles printed materials into fresh sheets, ready to be reused.

You'll need: a blender or food processor, a screen of some kind, both microfiber towels and larger, more absorbent towels, a shallow tub to hold the fibers, a large bowl to soak them in, and a collection of scrap paper: old shopping lists, unread newspaper, even this very pamphlet.

**Step One:** Tear up the scrap paper into tiny pieces and place them in the bowl. Add water to the bowl and soak the paper for 1-2 hours. When finished, move the mixture to the blender or food processor, add enough water to cover it, and blend it into a smooth pulp.

**Step Two:** Fill the shallow tub with a few inches of water. Pour the blended pulp into the tub and stir it well. Once done, take the screen and lower it into the pulp, raising it slowly to form a thin, even sheet. Be careful: If the layer is too thick, it won't dry well, but if it's too thin, it will be difficult to remove from the screen.

**Step Three:** Move the screen onto the absorbent towels and use a microfiber towel to absorb any excess water, pressing straight down to avoid shifting the pulp. Remove as much water as possible. Then, remove the sheet from the screen onto the microfiber towel and let dry.

**Step Four:** Use your paper for whatever you like!

(DIY instructions gathered from <https://woodlarkblog.com/diy-handmade-recycled-paper/>)