



Lab 8: Prompting Map Form and Visual Dialect

Use Dondis-style visual language to direct rhetorically powerful map aesthetics

Chapter Chapter 8	Level Intermediate	Time ~2-3 hr
Mode Individual or extension	Technology Image generation optional	Deliverable Map mission brief

Why This Lab Matters

LLMs tend to fall back on bland cartographic defaults unless a designer names the intended visual form. This lab teaches you to describe map aesthetics as a set of promptable dimensions: balance, fragmentation, specificity, motion, hierarchy, contrast, complexity, symbol type, generalization, and basemap detail.

Essential question

What cartographic decision should you be able to defend by the end of this lab?

Learning Objectives

- State the cartographic purpose, audience, evidence, and constraints.
- Use an LLM or assistant as a collaborator while preserving human judgment.
- Revise the artifact or prompt based on explicit critique.

At a glance

Inputs: Lab scenario, prompts, data notes, or map concept supplied in the activity.

Outputs: Map mission brief; Dondis vocabulary deck with at least eight dimensions; Four contrasting map-form concepts.

Evaluation: Clear purpose, defensible cartographic judgment, concise prompting, and evidence of human verification where needed.

LAB WORK

Setup: Choose One Map Mission ~10 min

Choose a topic that can plausibly support multiple visual tones. Use the same mission for every part so changes in response come from form language, not topic changes.

- Heat risk and cooling access in a city
- Earthquake activity in California
- Noise complaints in a neighborhood
- Wildfire evacuation readiness
- Transit access to clinics or grocery stores
- Invasive species spread across a region

Map mission:
Topic:
Place:
Audience:
Purpose:
Desired emotional tone:
What the map should make visually dominant:
What the map should downplay:
What the map must not imply:

PROCEDURE

Part 1 — Build a Dondis Vocabulary Deck ~20 min

Create a personal vocabulary deck from Figure 8.3. Write each dimension as a promptable slider rather than a label to memorize.

Dimension	Extreme A	Extreme B	Map effect	Useful when...
Balance	Uneven layout	Balanced layout	Example: Steers attention	Example: Audience needs quick comparison
Structure	Single map	Map series	Example: Steers attention	Example: Audience needs quick comparison

Starter examples only; expand this in your own notes or submission document.

Mini-deliverable

Complete at least eight rows. You will use this deck as your style vocabulary for the rest of the lab.

PROCEDURE

Part 2 — Prompt Four Contrasting Map Forms ~35 min

Ask an LLM to produce four concept descriptions for the same map mission. If your free LLM can generate images, request rough image drafts. If not, request detailed visual briefs.

Using my map mission, create four distinct map-form concepts. Do not write code. For each concept, specify layout, visual hierarchy, symbol strategy, basemap treatment, color/contrast, typography tone, and user impression.

Concept 1: balanced, top-down, minimalist basemap, simple hierarchy, stable/static.

Concept 2: uneven, fragmented, high contrast, accented hierarchy, dynamic/active.

Concept 3: map series, specific, multivariate, detailed basemap, complex hierarchy.

Concept 4: abstract, generalized, icon-symbol based, fluid layout, expressive style.

For each, explain what the form makes users feel or believe before they read the legend.

Map mission:

[PASTE]

Choose the two most rhetorically different outputs and annotate what changed.

PROCEDURE

Part 3 — Conjoin Dimensions into a Purposeful Visual Dialect ~30 min

Now combine dimensions deliberately. Avoid asking for isolated gimmicks. Choose a coherent visual dialect that matches the map's purpose.

Design one coherent visual dialect for my map mission by combining Dondis-style dimensions. Use this structure:

- primary style dialect: minimalist modern / data visualization / historical-retro / realistic-photographic / experiential-artistic / hybrid
- layout: balanced or uneven, with rationale
- continuity: fragmented or fluid, with rationale
- hierarchy: accented, flat, simple, or complex
- abstraction level: abstract, specific, generalized, or detailed
- symbol logic: icon, generic, multivariate, or univariate
- contrast: high or minimized
- basemap: detailed or minimalist
- motion: dynamic or stable
- typography tone:
- title tone:
- what this style helps users understand:
- what this style risks exaggerating or hiding:

Return the result as a reusable style schema.

Reminder

Strong style choices exclude things. A style schema should say what the map refuses to do.

PROCEDURE

Part 4 — Translate the Schema into a Production Prompt

~25 min

Turn the schema into a prompt that could guide a map-making agent or image-generation model.

Convert my style schema into a production-ready map design prompt. The prompt should:

1. name the map purpose and audience
2. declare the visual dialect early
3. specify Dondis-style form dimensions explicitly
4. describe layout, hierarchy, symbols, basemap, contrast, typography, and title behavior
5. include constraints that prevent default generic styling
6. include a self-check asking the assistant to explain how the output follows the style schema

Style schema:

[PASTE]

Run the production prompt in a new chat. Save the result or image.

PROCEDURE

Part 5 — Critique Aesthetic Fit ~25 min

Use critique to judge whether the aesthetic serves the map instead of merely looking interesting.

Critique this map design output against my style schema and map mission. Evaluate:

- whether the output preserves the intended visual dialect
- which Dondis dimensions are strongest
- which dimensions drifted or became generic
- whether the visual hierarchy matches the map's message
- whether the style supports credibility, emotion, and usability for the audience
- one style choice I should keep
- one style choice I should revise or remove

Do not praise the design generally. Be specific.

Mini-deliverable

Create a style-fit scorecard with five criteria and evidence from the output.

PROCEDURE

Part 6 — Style Drift Repair ~20 min

Iteration often pulls maps back toward defaults. Practice repairing drift without rewriting the whole design.

Revise the production prompt to prevent the style drift identified in the critique. Keep the map's purpose and data unchanged. Add only the minimum new language needed to preserve the intended visual dialect. Then list the exact phrases you added and the drift each phrase is meant to prevent.

DELIVERABLE

Submission ~15 min

- Map mission brief
- Dondis vocabulary deck with at least eight dimensions
- Four contrasting map-form concepts
- Reusable style schema
- Production-ready map design prompt
- LLM output or image description

- Style-fit scorecard
- Drift-repair prompt
- A 300-500 word reflection explaining how visual language changed your ability to direct the map