Writing for Designers

Tips for writing clearly about graphic design and other visual topics.

In general:

1. **Writing is hard work.** You should expect to invest serious time deciding what to say, and then putting words on paper. However, the payoff is huge—clear and persuasive communication will do as much or more for your career as your design ability or computer skills.

2. **There is no write—only rewrite.** Writing is at least a two-stage process—getting your ideas down on paper, and then refining descriptions, analogies, and points—adding and subtracting from the substance of your argument as you go, so that a reader will be persuaded that your ideas are valid.

   Over the course of writing, your knowledge of your topic should increase. And, *that learning is the main reason you have been asked to write*. Many students truncate the writing process, attempting to achieve sensible ideas and polished prose in a single draft—it can't be done. The paper or article that emerges from a single session is generally half-baked, and often full of errors. Does your reader care about a mistake or two? Probably not, but a paper full of errors that a simple proofreading could have caught is concrete evidence of laziness. If your paper has lots of mistakes—inconsistent tense, misspellings and incorrect word forms—"there" or "their" for "they're," for example—it contributes to the evidence that you have not done your job. (Microsoft Word's grammar and spelling checker is helpful but not perfect, and won't improve the substance of your writing). Always proofread a hard copy. When possible, ask a trustworthy friend or roommate to go over your papers. Even if your friend isn't a technically skilled writer, he or she will bring a fresh perspective to work you're been over and can point out places where you are not expressing yourself clearly. Incidentally, don't hesitate to ask for a non-major's help or use the writing center—an outside perspective will help keep your writing free of jargon and design-speak. If no one's available, take a break, read aloud or change the typeface (this really helps). The versions you turn in, in this class and others, should *at minimum*, be third drafts.

3. **Garbage in, garbage out.** No matter how clever a stylist you are, if you have not done your research or if you haven't given critical thought to the question you have been asked to address—in short, *if you have nothing to say*—it doesn't matter how well you say it. Be sure that there are ideas behind your words. *Pick (or frame) topics so that they will be of interest to you*. Otherwise, you will not devote the requisite time and attention to your writing. The following example, like most in this handout, is taken from turned-in AVT GD student writing:

   Example

   Sports illustrated (sic) is more about sports and tends to have more articles than photos in their issue. The color red is used on most pages that contain text.

   What information is being conveyed by these sentences? You can count on the reader to figure out that a magazine named *Sports Illustrated* will cover sports. The claim that the magazine has more articles than photos is likely untrue; more importantly, it's a meaningless comparison. Does the writer mean that he counted the articles and the photos and there were more articles, or does he mean that more space is devoted to columns of text than to imagery? *SI* is known for superb sports photography, yet the first sentence suggests that images are not an important part of the magazine. Finally, the equally empty observation about color (where and how is red used on the page?) is off topic. It should be included in a discussion about color use, not (in this case) in an introductory sentence.

4. **If you are assigned a short paper, be afraid—be very afraid.** All writing is hard, but writing short is an additional challenge—you must be persuasive, clear, clever, and make your points using spare and efficient language. You should always seek to avoid bloated writing, but with a short paper you must become a ruthless editor, eliminating extra words and unneeded asides. Build background information into larger points.

   Example
   ykky, an elegantly designed English-language tabloid from Sweden, just published its second issue.

   The sentence conveys, in 14 words, that *ykky* is the subject of the article to follow, *ykky* is new, *ykky* is a publication, *ykky* is from Sweden, *ykky* is written in English, *ykky* just published its second issue, and *ykky* is tabloid-sized. It also does the most important job a lead sentence can do—it tells the reader that the writer likes at least some things about *ykky* and will argue that it's "elegantly designed." Building a separate noun-verb construction for each of these points wastes time and space—and bores the reader.

5. **Build your paper out of paragraphs.** Every "graf" should have an introductory or thesis sentence, and each additional sentence should support that thesis. The next graf can either build upon the previous one or start with "bridge language" noting that a new topic is being introduced.

   Example
   The New York Times Magazine is a weekly, tabloid-size publication. The body text is mainly Times New Roman, and the headings vary between articles. The text is divided into two or three columns per page. Margins range from .75 to 1.5 inches in width....Images are generally limited to no more than one per page, and they tend to be large.

   This is not a paragraph, but a bunch of miscellaneous facts, bouncing from topic to topic (format, type, format again, image). There is no conceptual glue holding it together. Finally, writers shouldn't include facts unless they are dead certain of them. The *NYT Magazine*'s body copy is set in Simoncini Garamond, a typeface not even superficially similar to Times New Roman.

   Better
   The New York Times Magazine has a serious-minded design as befits its content—primarily news and analysis. There's little decoration or ornamentation, few bright colors except in photographs, and simple, organized and easy-to-follow layouts. White space, rather than frames or colored screens is used for page organization. Nevertheless, the design is consistently surprising and innovative.
   Next ¶: Using a strictly limited pallet of fonts the magazine still manages to make innovative use of typography....
   Next ¶: The magazine's personality can also be seen in its choice of imagery....

   Here, many of the same ideas in the example paragraph are brought to bear. But now they are enlisted in support of a thesis: *The New York Times* has a serious but excellent design. The next grafs defend and expand upon this idea.

5. **Stay on topic.** I often receive papers that take lengthy forays into subjects peripheral to the assigned topic. These sections are a waste of time to write and the teacher's time to read. Many teachers will not credit a long aside towards required length.

Style and Writing

1. **Don't assume too much.** Always introduce your topic within the body of your essay even though you make use of a title. Even if your teacher used a technical, esoteric, or slang term in class, don't assume you can use the same word unless its meaning is clear from context or you define it. When you aim your piece at a general reader (which you should always do) it shows your teacher that you really understand what you are writing about, not just parroting buzz words.

2. **Don't assume too little.** Back to the general reader—don't waste time describing what anyone should know. Assume your reader lives in the same culture you do unless you are specifically writing about something newly introduced or cross-cultural. Do not make observations unless they contribute to a larger point. Balancing too much/too little comes with practice.

3. **Do not narrate the research process** A phrase like "on line I found an interesting article...." or "I wondered if any other companies use logos that contain arrows...." is a waste of words.

4. **Avoid the Passive Voice**

Example 1

Rolling Stone, being a tabloid-styled magazine devoted to music, movies and current stars expresses itself through bold type and photography on almost every page.

This sentence contains pretty good observations, but trips up on language and style. **Problems:** *Rolling Stone* should be italic or underlined; "being" is an awkward word that doesn't contribute meaning; tabloid is a size, not a style; "music, movies and current stars" could be summarized without losing meaning, and these terms leave out "politics" which is also part of *Rolling Stone*'s editorial mix. "Expresses itself"— a magazine has no "self" to express; it has an identity or a brand, but that is chosen by the editors, the designers and the publisher; finally, type can be bold, and maybe photography can be too, but there are more precise word choices, which, if nothing else, would show you are not cutting corners by using the same descriptive term for two very different things.

Better: *Rolling Stone*, a tabloid-sized magazine devoted to entertainment and politics, uses bold typography and provocative photography.

The new sentence is both shorter and contains more information. However, as a writer, you must follow up, explain how and why bold type is used, and what makes the photography provocative (or torrid or sexy or disturbing or primitive).

Example 2

In comparing the two magazines *Mad* and *King*, it is apparent that they are almost completely different in structure, subject matter, typography imagery and layout.

Unneeded words spend more time than necessary describing the problem to be undertaken. "Layout" means the same thing as structure in this context.

Better: *Mad* and *King* magazines are different in structure, typography and imagery—a graphic reflection of their distinct editorial personalities.

4. **Aim for precision.** Be sure you know what your words mean. (For example, I often see students use the word "font" to refer to more than one weight or style—a font is only one member of a "family" which might include various weights—thin, extra-light, light, book, medium, bold, extra bold, and black and extra black; and widths—condensed and expanded; not to mention roman and italic (or oblique) versions.) It is crucial to use the vocabulary of your field precisely and correctly.

Example

....with text sometimes set in red.

The writer actually means headlines are sometimes red. When discussing type on a page, "text" refers to long text—the body of the article. More useful and precise terms include *body, headlines, decks, bylines, standing heads, signage, pull quotes, blocks, captions*, and *folios*. The word "line" should be avoided—the reader won't know if you mean a line of text or a rule. Similarly, fellow designers won't be impressed if you identify headlines as serif and decks as sans serif—you've just narrowed the font down to one of 10,000 possibilities. As a designer you must be able to comfortably describe type as *old style, modern, transitional, Swiss, humanist-sans, grotesque, wood, postmodern, Egyptian (or slab serif), novelty* or *decorative*—or even more precisely (*clarendon, glyphic)*. Better still, identify the font by name if you know it.

5. **Never say *that* something is true, say *why* it is true. This can save you the embarrassment of not knowing what you're talking about.**

Example 1

This magazine is geared at a wealthy consumer.

This wasn't true in this particular case (*GQ*). If the writer had backed up his statements, he might have learned something about his topic.

Better: From the expensive products and lavish vacations featured in *GQ*, a reader might guess that the magazine is aimed at the very rich. However, the publication's media kit reveals a different story.

Not only does the revised sentence introduce the interesting observation that magazines do not always seem to be for their real readers, it shows evidence of a little extra research.

Example 2

Both magazines contain a variety of bright and dull colors of fashions depicted.

What is a bright color? What is a dull color? Are these two (fashion) magazines unique in having these colors, or is this quality common to all fashion magazines? Is the writer talking about the design of the two magazines (which was the assigned topic) or about the colors of fashion shown in the photographs? The sentence begs many questions but answers none. The writer might have just as legitimately mentioned that both magazines are printed on paper.

Better: While both magazines use ranging colors, *Vogue* tends to use a toned-down and sophisticated pallet. *Glamour* decorates its pages with more youthful colors—pastels, saturated pinks and hot purples.

As with typography, as a designer you must describe colors in evocative terms. *Tints, tones, hues, value, intensity* (or *saturation*), and color names should all be in your active vocabulary.

6. **Be careful with slang and casual language. *Never* use i.m.-speak.** It is ok, and sometimes clever, to throw in a little slang to bridge ideas, to linguistically underline a point, or to warm up your writing: "The take away from the presentation will be that Mutual of Omaha is a cutting-edge provider of insurance products." "But Paul Rand would not settle for half a loaf. He insisted on complete creative control." However, slang should not be used as a replacement for precision or critical thought.

Example 1
GQ and *Cook's Illustrated* are two plainly different periodicals, with differences outweighing similarities about 100:1

This sounds and is bombastic. It offers an opinion with no backup, and puts slang where a reader might reasonably expect a fact or substantive observation. It's better to shore up a point (that *GQ* and *CI* are different—although if it's so "plain," it might not be a point worth making in the first place) with examples rather than simply repeating the contention using different language.

7. **Don't use big words for the sake of having big words.** Good writing is simple and accessible writing. While it is sometimes necessary to use a long word because it provides precision, it's a bad habit to use fancy language when simple words would serve equally well. Like slang, two-dollar words can alienate your reader.

Example
Another component of these magazines' differences is the demographic they intend to appeal to.

The word "component," in particular, is thrown in just to be showy, and the writer has to do some acrobatics just to get it in there. Its inclusion forces a passive-voice sentence that gets the writer into trouble. A magazine's readership can be thought of as a reflection of its content or visa-versa but this sentence suggest a more incidental relationship. It's probably best to eliminate this point entirely. So, in short, if you find yourself doing contortions to achieve inclusion....oops, sorry.

Better—Eliminate, or:
The magazines appeal to different readerships.

Example 2
GQ and *Vanity Fair* are very similar in the aspect that they are both fashion magazines, just appealing to different genders.

Better
GQ and *Vanity Fair* both have general-interest articles that appeal across genders. But, the slant of each is clear from fashion and advertising pages—*GQ* is all suits, ties and Scotch, *VF* pictures couture and runs ads for florid perfumes.