Designing with words: Writing *as* design

Kyle Rath

School of the Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
kyle.rath@up.ac.za (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8336-849X)

Jacques Lange

School of the Arts, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
bluprint@iafrica.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7675-6777)

ABSTRACT

Writing for design has, over the past few decades, seen steady appreciation. Literature on design writing refers to it as a mostly technical vocation centred on the *craft* of writing in and of itself. Moreover, the suggestion seems to be that while writing is beneficial to, it is also distinct from the practice of communication design. Elsewhere, writing in the context of communication design is viewed as a specialisation – a skill that is typically reserved for a specialist writer who helps craft a tone to complement a predominantly visual design.

In this article, we argue that writing for design is a far more complex and foundational skill for communication designers. In doing so, we explore the interdependence of narrative and writing, as a systematic design process and so highlight the importance of creative writing *as* design in an educational context and emphasise how integral writing is to the designer as a storyteller. To demonstrate this, we explore a selection of student work from an editorial project that has, for the past 21 years, been delivered to fourth-year Information Design students at the University of Pretoria (and which formed part of the 2023 *Stories Worth Telling* retrospective exhibition).

Keywords: Design writing, writing for design, copywriting, creative writing, typography, *Stories Worth Telling*.

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Act one: Setting the scene

Writing for design has, to varying purposes over the past few decades and in different design fields, seen steady appreciation. Design writing[1] typically refers to a fairly robust wealth of literature published since roughly the mid-1990s, which focuses on design writing as a mostly technical vocation centred on the *craft* of writing in and of itself. Here, a raft of writers since Kliment (1998) tend to describe something of a ready-for-design adaptation of Strunk and White's renowned *The elements of style* (1959), whereby they offer useful tips and insights on writing with clarity and intention, as well as strategies on writing for user engagement, persuasion and providing 'brand' tone.

DiMarco's *Communications writing and design* (2017), for instance, offers analyses of project-based examples that demonstrate how to effectively and persuasively write for design across a broad gamut of communication domains (marketing, advertising, public relations, social media, and so on). Both Ilyin's *Writing for the design mind* (2018) and Kubie's *Writing for designers* (2018) provide light-hearted learner guides packed with tips and techniques for non-writer-designers who want to learn to write. Podmajersky's *Strategic writing for UX* (2019) and Metts and Welfle's *Writing is design* (2020) offer strategic approaches to refining the craft of 'human-centred writing' as a form of humanising 'cold' language in the context of user interface design.

Interestingly, most of these later works are explicitly aimed at the ever-dominant user-interface-experience digital design arena. Indeed, as we shall later remark upon, the "copywriter" as a specialised, "non-designer" position that has loomed in various design fields (perhaps most frequently in advertising and branding), has taken up a definite vocational seat at the digital interface in particular. In making this observation, our point is that what these works and many others like them seem to demonstrate, at least somewhat, is that writing is inherently beneficial to, yet distinct from communication design. And this is certainly reflected in the structural makeup of many medium-to-large-scale design agencies/consultancies internationally.

On the other hand, it seems, writing is viewed as a specialisation – a skill that, although some designers may informally be adept at, is typically reserved for a specialist writer (or a designer who has "become a copywriter") who helps craft a tone to complement a predominantly visual design insofar as it lends a proverbial "voice" or personality. As Jansen (2023), creative director at Switch Design, South

Africa, argues, while communication designers are often involved in "writing" conceptually in the sense of developing brand tone, slogans, and communication strategy, creative writing "proper" is in many design agencies/consultancies mostly reserved for copywriters hired in a specialised capacity. Designers are thus expected to have something of a working knowledge of writing in so far as it is easier to understand and communicate with content writers who add relevant "words" to designs later on. Jansen (2023) argues that communication designers seldom occupy the role of visual and linguistic narrators. It is indeed the case that, especially in the context of user experience design, the importance of voice and tone in interfaces continues to pull focus, and as a result, copywriters are being hired in spades.

In the discursive space, writing about design has, for at least the past four decades, seen an immense uptick (Heller 2009:5; Lees-Maffei 2013:3). Design anthologies, including *Looking closer* and *Readings from the field*, journals such as *Design Issues, Design Culture*, and indeed *Image & Text*, design publications including *Emigre*, *Ray Gun*, *Eye*, *International Council of Design* and *AIGA* alongside a plethora of detailed design history readers from Heller (2006; 2010), Jubert (2006), Meggs (1998), Lupton and Miller (1996) and further threadbare design standards from many others[2] demonstrate an intense appreciation for writing *about* design.

Elsewhere, the importance of writing as a design temperament, outside of the digital and copywriting space, is emphasised as having equal importance as any traditionally visual design element or artefact. That is, over and above the typographic treatment of type, creative (and other forms of) writing offers just as much a throughway to creative thinking as any other design medium. Grace Lees-Maffei (2013:2) argues that the ability to craft words is just as instrumental in inducing seductive communication as it is in examining designed objects. Conveying information visually is an act of *translation*, as is the case when writing rhetorically.

Notwithstanding these excursions into design criticism, demonstrations on writing methodology, and the ubiquity of writing *on* and *about* design, we agree with Lees-Maffei (2013:4) that the process of writing as a design language has, still today, received relatively little attention from designers in both design practice and academia. Moreover, we agree with Heller (2013) that communication designers (and design students in particular) benefit from developing *both* their creative writing and copywriting abilities. We maintain that designers should not only be trained in the domains of communication design, marketing, and strategic problem-solving but also in terms of developing literary/wordsmithing skills as a form of creative writing ability. This is because writing is not merely a tool that helps

enhance communication design. In a sense, it is the fundamental principle of communication (design) – communication driven by reading (understanding) and translation (articulation). It is through the act of writing from a place of sincerity, that design writing lends a sense of empathy, authenticity, authority, and relatability to the work.

With this in mind, in this article, we explore the interconnections and interdependence of narrative and writing, as a systematic design process, and why communication designers benefit from multiple and different writing skills to be able to practise design effectively. To demonstrate this, we explore, as case studies, a selection of student work from a highly regarded editorial project (the 'book project') that has, for the past 21 years, been delivered to fourth-year Information Design students at the University of Pretoria. In particular, we explore a cross section of works, completed at various points during this two-decade period that have been exhibited as part of the *Stories Worth Telling* (2023) retrospective exhibition (Figure 1).

We hope that highlighting the importance of creative writing as design in an educational context, tested and sustained for nearly a quarter of a century, offers something of a nuanced view on the need for creative writing in its various forms as more than just a tool in the designer's arsenal. We argue that the robust display of over two hundred crafted stories showcased as part of the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition demonstrates how integral writing is to the designer as a storyteller.

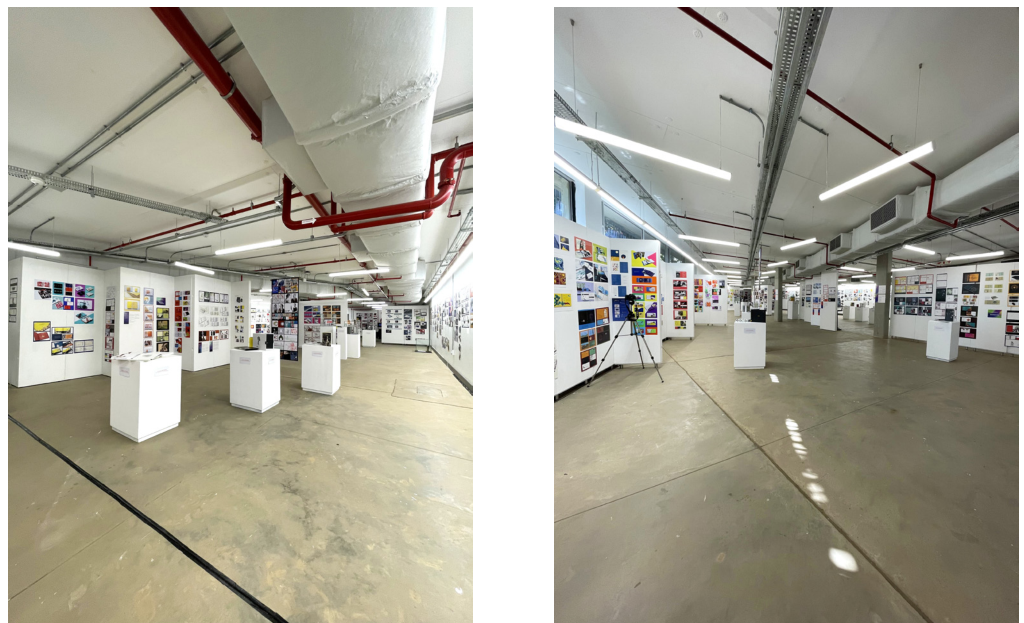


FIGURE **Nº 1**

Installation views of the *Stories Worth Telling* retrospective exhibition, 2023. Image courtesy of the Information Design division, School of the Arts, University of Pretoria.

Act one, scene 2: Learning to write – a pedagogical overview

Following Cezzar (2020), effective communication design education is not merely teaching competency in specific, often siloed, design skills, media, and related fields of expertise. Effective education makes a range of visual, linguistic, and computational abilities accessible to students to expose them to a wider array of outcomes without directing them into specific paths based on perceived aptitude. Meyer and Norman (2019:14) argue that traditional design schools typically produce practitioners who serve various design specialisations. They continue, however, that most design education addresses only 'performance challenges'[3] and often avoids dealing with systemic and contextual challenges (Meyer & Norman 2019:16). As the world faces challenges brought on by climate change, artificial intelligence, food shortages, and so on, designers need to play a larger role in not only designing but developing interdependent, multidisciplinary competencies beyond the design studio (Meyer & Norman 2019:14).

We[4] agree with Cezzar, Meyer, and Norman that a broader range of skills, underpinned by a keen awareness of social, economic, contextual, and historical issues that are syphoned through or actioned by the individual designer is vitally important in the context of design education (for the purposes of this article, however, we refer to transdisciplinary rather than multidisciplinary[5] as a more appropriate descriptor). Our approach to teaching is very much in line with this ethos. This is perhaps most evident in our appreciation of the rhetorical potential of linguistic and non-linguistic typography. It is worth mentioning that Lange graduated with a BA FA (Information Design) degree in 1988 and Rath in 2011 with a BA Information Design degree.[6] We mention this not only to establish the weight of design practice and teaching experience, but, more importantly, to point out the generational differences that add various (and, we think, valuable) perspectives in terms of professional practice, technical skill, conceptual approaches to design thinking, design craft, design media (for instance, print versus screen), historical understanding, and life experiences, particularly as it applies to design and creative writing. That is, having both taught extensively in the field of communication design, we agree that in addition to establishing a core understanding of the rhetorical capacity of design, design students should simultaneously learn about and practise creative writing as a means to expand their rhetorical toolkit.

This approach follows the core structure of the Information Design (ID) course at the University of Pretoria, where students, over four years, are exposed to numerous

design fields (branding, advertising, corporate identity, typographic design, web and app design, animation, film, photography, wayfinding, editorial design, product and packaging design, illustration, visualisation through drawing, game design, 3D design, set design and several others), delivered by an expansive team of practising designers, researchers, writers and practitioners in fields outside of design (for instance, engineering, play therapy, law practice and various others). Projects, and particularly the book project, are developed to train students in the technical competencies and understanding of the semiotic potential of media alongside theoretical studies in visual communication. The intention, however, is to demonstrate how these competencies are fundamental to nurturing empathy and civic responsibility when tackling real-world, complex (or "wicked") problems.

The philosophy in ID is to consider teaching and learning strategies that centre on learning by doing, hermeneutic enquiry, experiential learning, and balancing theory with practice, amongst others. In other words, we appreciate that design does not exist in a social vacuum; rather, it affects and is affected by larger social concerns and consequently, students are encouraged to appreciate the outcome of their work within a broad socio-cultural environment. As a unique design course in South Africa in terms of its broad-based approach,[7] the BA ID programme promotes design thinking through exposure to and integration of various communication design disciplines – creative writing and communication design are just two components in this regard.

In terms of creative writing and typography specifically, we consider "text" as constituting at least half of any design. This approach is unpacked further in the section titled 'Act one: scene four. Writing the story' below, which engages with the concepts of *deep engagement* with content and *authentic translation* through authorship, textually and visually speaking.

Act one, scene three: Designing the story

Designers are storytellers (Mayo 1993:42). It is the stories, not the objects in and of themselves, through which meaning is constructed and consequently re-presented (Sethi 2015). Stories are a designer's forms; they manifest in designed artefacts, are organised in narrative structures, and are constructed of interconnected meanings that come together as a site of rich, historical rhetorical material, transmitted to the user (Atzmon 2008:36).

Design is generally considered a problem-solving exercise. While this is not wrong, "problem-solving"[8] suggests something of a cold, methodological practice. Nigel Cross (2023:26) agrees and adds that the general perception of "problem-solving" is something akin to a systematic procedure involving analysis, problem and solution identification and evaluation, whereas Linda Laursen and Louise Haase (2019:16) compare the term to a type of "cookbook" whereby thoughtful design is substituted for problem-solving "recipes."

These criticisms suggest that the term does not take into account the more innate, human aspects of storytelling that designers enlist to convey aspects of beauty, feelings, and sensations we experience when confronted by, for instance, humour or conflict. Designers are concerned with more than plugging communicative holes – we invoke multisensory experiences, elicit experiential modes of understanding, and deeply understand the psychology of perception (Lupton 2017:9). Stories, unlike communicative checklists and manuals, depict action and stimulate curiosity. A designer's storybook employs form, colour, and, of course, *writing*, to shape its chapters, and *language*, be it visual or verbal, to colour its pages.

In navigating our environment, human beings seek out and create patterns that intrigue and stimulate us (Lupton 2017:11). Designers direct, streamline, and connect these often seemingly disparate patterns. As directors, they navigate *how* human agency is driven by a need to generate meaning. Educated in the art of visual rhetoric, they map out conceptual connections and point to cultural or visual patterns of connectivity and recognisability to drive human interaction. They do this by seeking connections, patterns, or symbols that help shape our perception of the world. As Žižek (2005) explains, operating within a semiotic space of symbolism, designers utilise 'narrative frames' as their primary way of communicating with their audience. Whether by way of synecdochic patterning, or mapping of metaphorical, metonymic, antithetical, alliterative, ironic, anastrophic, onomatopoeic, hyperbolic, and other analogies, designers use these rhetorical 'frames' to build narrative arcs that are climactic, shocking, gut-wrenching, solemn or cheerful, which are pieced together as a visual story.

Audiences are also innately predisposed to look for stories; stories that resonate with their experiences and provide examples that help visualise cultural and historical concepts (Norman 1988:57). As Barthes (1977:79) explains, storytelling is present in every form of human creation. According to Barthes (1977), narratives work by reactivating well-known sequences and ideological themes and, therefore, absorb us in convention, only to provide an adjusted storyline that appears at once surprising and familiar. Visualising signification in this way builds and naturalises narratives

using metaphor and analogy that, while appealing to our emotive sensibility, also somehow seem obviously logical (Buchanan 1985:8). Designers access these rich narratives interwoven into design media and repurpose them as a kind of visual shorthand. Bruinsma (2001) speaks of design as a process of re-interpretation where designs 'live off of' the recognisability of their visual icons. The designer re-writes the existing messages of design symbols; they show the 'origin' for contextual reference, but then shape the original character.

Act one, scene four: Writing the story

For some, writing is viewed as a specialisation – a skill that some designers may choose to develop if, for instance, they elect to become a copywriter. As a form of copywriting, great writing often helps craft a tone to complement a predominantly visual design insofar as it lends a proverbial 'voice' or personality. As stated above, Jansen (2023) argues that while communication designers are often involved in "writing" conceptually in the sense of developing brand tone, slogans, and communication strategy, creative writing "proper" is in many design agencies/ consultancies, mostly reserved for specialist copywriters. Designers are thus expected to have some working knowledge of writing in so far as it is easier to understand and communicate with content writers who add relevant "words" to designs later on. Jansen argues that communication designers seldom take on the role of visual and linguistic narration, at least in branding. It is also the case that, in the context of user experience design, the importance of voice and tone in interfaces continues to pull focus. As a result, copywriters are being hired for the writing task instead of designers.

Writing is, however, intrinsic to design thinking in both a practical and technical sense. Writing is, by its very communicative nature, far more than a companion piece. As several authors have argued, writing is a way of thinking through ideas as a sort of visual linguicism or verbal-visual brainstorming. In the most direct sense, writing can function as a form of visualisation. Or as a form of scamping, or sketching (Markussen & Knutz 2013). In design, scamping generally refers to *image* generating practice, where one's conceptualisation and thinking about a design product is visually expressed (Coleman 2015:261). The proverbial "blank page" is arguably as prevalent in visual design practices as in writing. Thus, like scamping, writing as a free-thinking conceptualisation tool (in the form of mindmapping, shorthand, notetaking, and so on) is a useful way to generate loose ideas. Furthermore, like sketching, writing is a *fast* and *inexpensive* way to capture and work through

(process) ideas (Quintana 2018). Moreover, beyond its more obvious mind mapping capacity, the act of writing is itself a thinking tool. Words shape our thinking in the sense that expressing ideas by way of writing allows for new narrative connections to form. In developing the ability to write, ideas become clearer (uncovering potential gaps in trains of thought), thoughts are more organised, and critical thinking improves. Péter Balázs Polgár (2021) suggests that, as opposed to drawing scamps (a picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes), written words are often more pointed and allow for less vagueness. Tobias van Schneider (2016), Lillian Xiao (2018), and Melody Quintana (2018) agree that writing has the potential to help bring clarity to a designer's mode of thinking and that great writing can help craft effective content, think through complex scenarios, and communicate ideas with clarity and impact.

Anne-Laure Le Cunff (2022) and Eugen Eşanu (in Fleck 2019) add that writing also serves a curatorial purpose where, by way of shorthand in the research phase of the design process, designers filter relevant aspects of data that may make its way into the design. Le Cunff (2022) clarifies that, in this way, writing is a cognitive filter. Instead of visually consuming masses of disparate content, writing can help anchor what the designer intends to research and thus potentially guide the sort of preliminary research toward focussed and high-quality sources.

Writing is also something of a recourse to self-expression and reflection. Julie Zhuo (2014) describes writing as a medium of retrospection that she has used to track her development in terms of 'the ways in which her thinking about design' has changed. She refers to writing as a way 'to remember, to preserve the scrap of a voice in a particular age.'

Apart from the exploratory benefits of writing, as mentioned up to now, writing is, of course, just as crucial in actual storytelling. Writing, in its many forms,[9] is not only an exercise in expression, but one of *translation* (interpretation/articulation). For designers in particular, who typically design for an end-user (client-facing), focusing on the translation of written content derived from one audience to another and from one medium to another, writing should, as Cezzar (2020) suggests, take a primary role. The designer of today is constantly negotiating different contexts and cultures. Eşanu (in Fleck 2019) argues that to do so sensitively, writing is an extremely effective tool in forming empathetic practices surrounding listening. For instance, practising writing for *translation* develops a sense of measured deliberation when investigating and assessing research, insight, and eventual content. In short, it encourages in the designer a critical, discerning temperament.

But, as with all forms of *translation*, there is the very real danger of becoming "lost within it." As Michael Rock (1996) points out, the designer, as a translator, much like a literary translator, is amenable to injecting their own contextual influences into their translation. This has the potential to both positively and negatively affect the translation. On the one hand, as Don Norman (2008) explains, by empathising with their reader, a design writer comes to understand their readers' backgrounds, interests, and so on before translating. Norman warns, however, that it is easy for a designer to either falsely claim to have researched their reader or, more commonly, to think they understand their readers when, in fact, they base their notions solely on their own knowledge and experience. In this case, the designer assumes that everyone else is just like them. This sort of translation is clearly inept since the designer merely mimics one medium in another.

A more developed sense of translation results in separating the content and the idea from the medium. A trained design writer understands where continuity should be maintained and when other forms of translation (through new media, technical capacities, writing, language models, and so on) are more appropriate to a given storytelling scenario. Norman (2008) suggests that the design writer should begin by considering basic psychological principles that should be tested and tried out with readers who are similar to the intended audience and then revise their translation if necessary.

Cezzar (2020:221) explains that successful translation means reading in one 'language' and writing in another. Clay Shirky (2010:x-xi) adds that translation refers to a kind of literacy whereby reading a medium allows the translator to create in it and to understand the difference between good and bad uses. Therefore, in as much as good writing reflects a designer well-versed in translation, achieving a successfully articulated translation requires excellence in reading in the first place. In the context of design education specifically, Cezzar (2020:221) suggests that students should be instructed to read non-design text and images and demonstrate their level of comprehension and analysis before attempting to articulate a translation of their content. In addition, the ability to read "design" language itself should be nurtured (by way of, for instance, examining other students' work, and figuring out why their designs might look the way they do and communicate in a particular way over another). In this way, designers are trained to write in response to probing questions, including: "Why does this look like it does?," "Why does it work this way?," and "What is prioritised?." These reflections develop verbal and written language for articulating the work while also building a knowledge base of the affordances and limitations of each medium.

Clearly then, writing for design is not merely a specialisation, but is intrinsic to the very rhetorical nature of communication design. Writing for design is as much a rhetorical skill as is a deep "reading"' of colour, illustration or charcoal. It is as much an exercise in reading the rhetorical potential of the design tool itself, as it is a reading of the audience for whom these rhetorical tools are intended. In other words, writing is not merely a tool that helps enhance communication design. In a sense, it is the fundamental principle of communication (design) – communication driven by reading (understanding) and translation (articulation). It is through the act of writing from a place of sincerity, that design writing lends a sense of empathy, authenticity, authority and relatability to the work.

Act two: Introducing the main characters

This section provides selective examples from the *Stories Worth Telling* retrospective exhibition (2023) that illustrate how engagement in creative writing benefits the designers in making effective design decisions that scaffold all aspects of visual and verbal narrative and storytelling. These examples illustrate how engagement in self-generated writing creates deep understanding and empathy with content, which enhances all aspects of decision-making during the design process that, in turn, results in authentic design solutions that move beyond mere aesthetics.

FIGURE **Nº 2a**

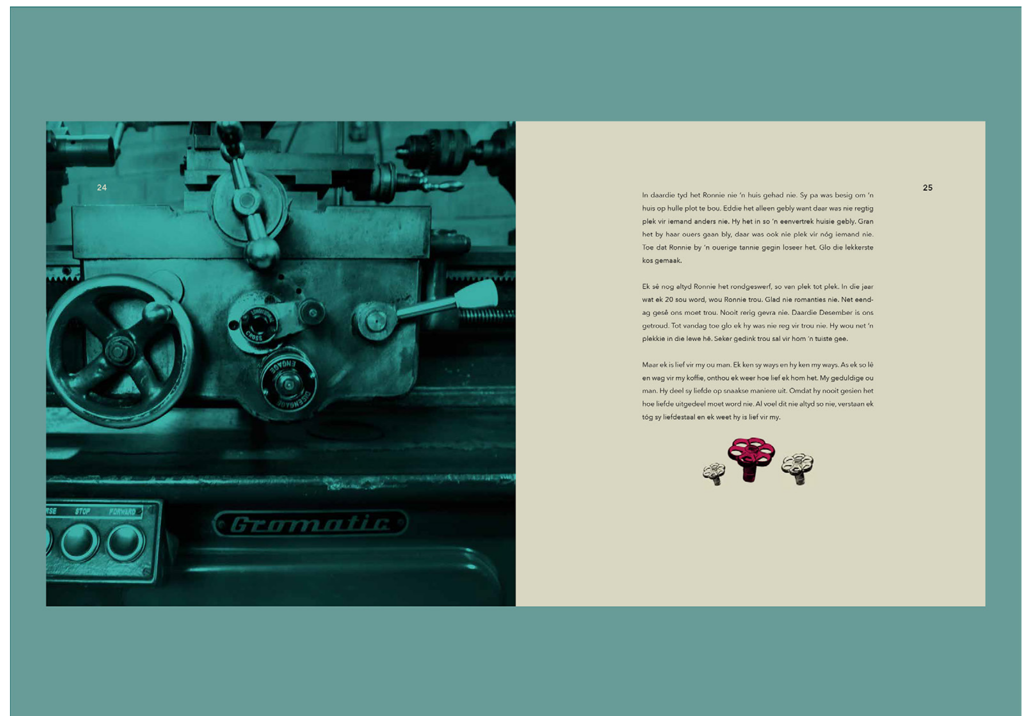
Ancke Groenewald, *Stilweg*, 2015. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 2b**

Ancke Groenewald, *Stilweg*, 2015. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 2c**

Ancke Groenewald, *Stilweg*, 2015. Image courtesy of the designer.



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In daardie tyd het Ronnie nie 'n huis gehad nie. Sy pa was besig om 'n huis op hulle plot te bou. Eddie het alleen gebly want daar was nie regtig plek vir iemand anders nie. Hy het in so 'n eenvertrek huisie gebly. Gran het by haar ouers gaan bly, daar was ook nie plek vir nóg iemand nie. Toe dat Ronnie by 'n ouerige tannie gegin loseer het. Glo die lekkerste kos gemaak.

Ek sê nog altyd Ronnie het rondgeswerf, so van plek tot plek. In die jaar wat ek 20 sou word, wou Ronnie trou. Glad nie romanties nie. Net eendag gesê ons moet trou. Nooit rerig gevra nie. Daardie Desember is ons getroud. Tot vandag toe glo ek hy was nie reg vir trou nie. Hy wou net 'n plekkie in die lewe hê. Seker gedink trou sal vir hom 'n tuiste gee.

Maar ek is lief vir my ou man. Ek ken sy ways en hy ken my ways. As ek so lê en wag vir my koffie, onthou ek weer hoe lief ek hom het. My geduldige ou man. Hy deel sy liefde op snaakse maniere uit. Omdat hy nooit gesien het hoe liefde uitgedeel moet word nie. Al voel dit nie altyd so nie, verstaan ek tóg sy liefdestaal en ek weet hy is lief vir my.

FIGURE **Nº 2d**

Ancke Groenewald, *Stilweg*, 2015. Image courtesy of the designer.

In the project *Stilweg*'s creative rationale Groenewald (2015) explains, 'I chose to design and write a book about my grandfather. [His] hobby … is to restore cars older than 40 years. It isn't only his hobby that I chose to write about but rather his entire life.' As an example of how her writing informed critical creative decisions such as the book's title and chapter headers, which just use one or two highly descriptive words, she explains, 'He is a very quiet person and likes to be alone. Therefore, I decided to use the word "*Stilweg*" as a title for the book, which means quietly. Examples of chapter titles are "*Kaalvoetnooi*" (barefoot lass), "*Handewerk*" (handywork), "Rover" (a car brand), and "Reinol" (hand cleaner)' (Groenewald 2015).

The designer/author's writing reflects the protagonist's personality, and the writing process reflects the empathy that she managed to create with the subject and his life's story. This is further illustrated by the writing style which uses short and no-nonsense sentences, which further reflects the subject's personality and organised lifestyle. An extract from the book's back cover illustrates how Groenewald (2015) approached the tone and voice of writing:

> The leather seats stick to his bare thighs as he shuffles about from pure excitement. Real black leather seats. It is his first time driving about in such an interesting little car. Wessel's dad says it is a 1930 model. A

> pitch-black Austin. Wessel knows a man called Austin, but he would certainly not fit in this little car. Wessel sits very close to him on the back seat, the front seats almost touching their knees. From the inside the car feels like a fancy sunroom, but from the outside it looks like an upright oil can. This is the story of a man whose dedicated passion for cars showed him how to love, live and work tenaciously (Translated from Afrikaans).

The designer/author's writing informed her approach to imaging, type, layout, and colour choices that are authentically reflective of the book's protagonist and life narrative. Furthermore, in feedback provided during the curatorial process of the *Stories Worth Telling* exhibition, Groenewald (2023) states:

> I have used the skills I've learned during this project in many aspects of my work and still do to this day. It taught me to constantly question if my designs are relevant to the content it speaks. It taught me to use words economically and enhance the core message of my designs. Most importantly, it taught me to understand the relationship between storytelling and design.

FIGURE **Nº 3a**

Anna Durheim, *My Beautiful Gift*, 2016. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 3b**

Anna Durheim, *My Beautiful Gift*, 2016. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 3c**

Anna Durheim, *My Beautiful Gift*, 2016. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 3d**

Anna Durheim, *My Beautiful Gift*, 2016. Image courtesy of the designer.

One aspect that lecturers have always highlighted during the book project over the years is the importance of names and naming since people's names often reflect their personalities. Furthermore, book titles and chapters establish a book's narrative content, tone, and persona. An excellent example of this is Nobel Laureate JM Coetzee's 1999 book *Disgrace*. A single word sets the scene of what is to follow in a very powerful manner and illustrates the power of words.

Anna Durrheim's book project, *My Beautiful Gift*, tells the story of student leader and theologian, Kabelo Mothlakane. Student leadership came under scrutiny during the South African higher education Fees Must Fall protests in 2015-2016. Kabelo was involved in many fields, from politics and economics to theology, and community development. He developed interesting, and sometimes controversial ideas. The book explores how his life experiences shaped his philosophies. From a homeless child who was abandoned by his mother, to the first black chaplain at St Johns College. His life has bridged African and Western cultures, as well as poverty and privilege. The book's title, *My Beautiful Gift*, is not just the meaning of his name – Kabelo – but also the name of a hymn of hope sung by his grandmother when he was gravely ill as an infant (Durrheim 2023). Durrheim explains that she was only able to get the naming solution because of her intimate knowledge of

the protagonist's life, which he shared during the interview process since she was able to ask all kinds of questions and link various parts of his life story together.

The opening paragraph of chapter three titled 'Searching for a Black Jesus' (Durrheim 2016) reads as follows:

> "When I try to explain my concept of religion to my students, I use a cell phone," explains Kabelo, creating a rectangular shape with his long fingers. "I stand in the centre of the class, hold up my phone and ask the boys what they can see. Some can only see the screen, others see the back of the phone, or the thin edge with the volume buttons. They all see something different, yet it is the same phone. This is what I believe about religion. It is all a matter of perspective."

This extract also illustrates how the text informed the designer's approach to imaging and typography which is eclectic, reflective and authentic to the narrative of the book. Durrheim was able to achieve this because of her direct access to the protagonist and insight into his life experiences.

FIGURE **Nº 4a**

Bronwen Webb, *Thus speaketh the Lord,* 2012. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 4b**

Bronwen Webb, *Thus speaketh the Lord,* 2012. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 4c**

Bronwen Webb, *Thus speaketh the Lord,* 2012. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 4d**

Bronwen Webb, *Thus speaketh the Lord,* 2012. Image courtesy of the designer.

The same applies to Bronwyn Webb's book titled *Thus speaketh the Lord* (Figure 4). Webb (2023) explains that her book:

> is about an ordinary, suburban pensioner who recounts his extraordinary, supernatural experiences. The book is based on stories told to me by my neighbour, Neil, an unassuming man in his 70s who used to tell me fantastical tales over the garden fence. Neil realised that Jesus speaks to him and that he must write everything down to retell everything he hears. He is doubted by those he tells his stories to, and then starts to doubt himself until he is visited by an angel who re-affirms his belief in his experiences.

Webb's first-hand experiences with the protagonist informed all her narrative and design decisions. Furthermore, the narrative of the book is defined by language and the use of single words which are illustrated visually trough image and typography. The book's chapters are titled 'Revelation', 'Doubt', 'Affirmation', 'Adversity', 'Reinforcement', and 'Mission', which indicates how the narrative unfolds.

FIGURE **Nº 5a**

Kiara White, *My granny's memoir*, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 5b**

Kiara White, *My granny's memoir*, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

Kiara White's book, *My granny's memoir*, and systematic project development, provide an apt example of how Their research and writing informed her design and decision-making processes. White (2023) explains:

> My gran grew up in a small mining town in KwaZulu-Natal. Her childhood was unashamedly quaint and the years that followed played out to soundtracks from the Beatles and featured endless rounds of badminton. Granny is the type of person who gets all giddy at the sight of a blooming cactus flower. She also won't set foot out of the house without a bright coat of lipstick on. She has a way of putting you right there in the moment of a story, so much so that you'll want her to re-tell it every time you sit down for a cuppa. Gran feels that she's lived an ordinary-sounding life. To others, that may not be the case.

As White conducted interviews with her subject, she was able to identify key themes that determined the book's narrative structure as well as the tone of voice for each chapter (Figure 6). The process of deeply engaging with the research and writing in her role as author enabled White to plot a well-structured narrative. This, in turn, allowed her to make effective strategic and creative decisions quickly, which enabled her to produce more than double the amount of work than her peers generated within the same deadline parameters. This clearly indicates one of the benefits of designers engaging in writing because it makes them more productive and efficient, as noted by several other sources mentioned earlier in this article.

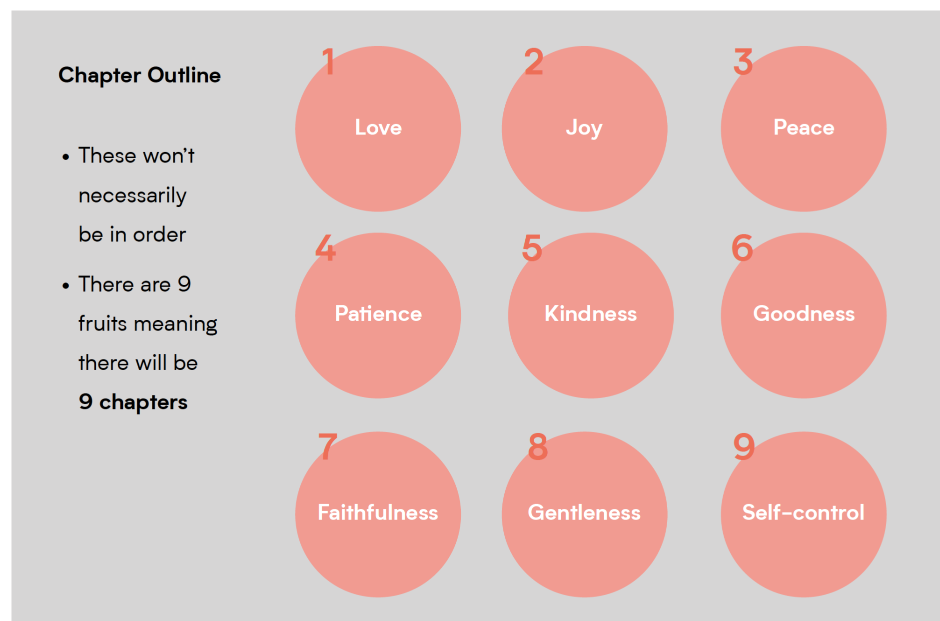

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Thematic structure of Kiara White's Book project creative rationale. 2019. Image supplied by the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 7**

Chapter titles of *My granny's memoir*. Image supplied by the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 8a**

Visual interpretation of chapter titles of *My granny's memoir*. Image supplied by the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 8b**

Visual interpretation of chapter titles of *My granny's memoir*. Image supplied by the designer.

Another aspect that highlights the benefits of designers also being authors is White's use of language as written and visual design tools to facilitate storytelling, as she quite often uses the combination to provide a subtext that is not explicitly articulated in the written text. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate how White converted Figure 6 into the book's narrative structure and how she used written language to invite readers to engage with her book through enticing chapter titles that contribute to the reader's engagement with content. These are not just interpreted as text but also as visual storytelling since White used her Gran's own vectorised handwriting as part of the visual language which adds another layer of authentic storytelling (Figure 8).

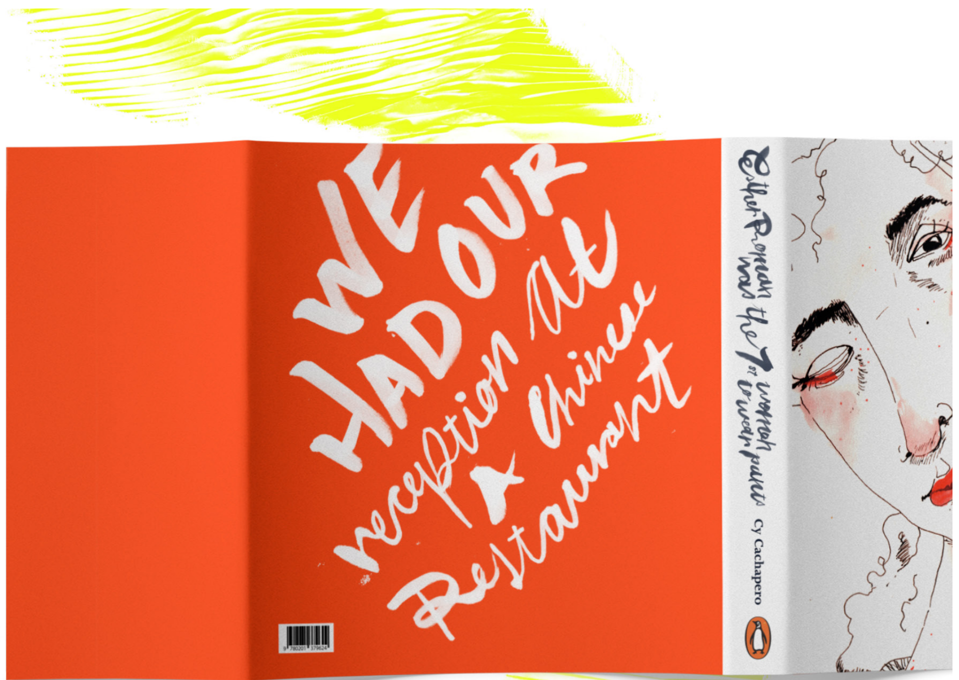

FIGURE **Nº 9a**

Cy van der Spuy, *Ester Roman was the first woman to wear pants*, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 9b**

Cy van der Spuy, *Ester Roman was the first woman to wear pants*, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

FIGURE **Nº 9c**

Cy van der Spuy, *Ester Roman was the first woman to wear pants*, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

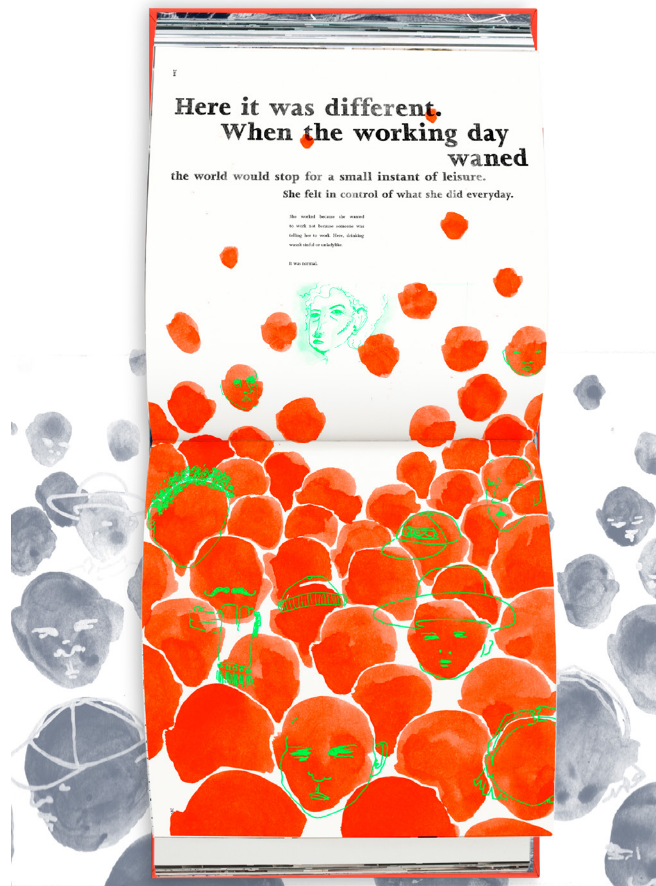

FIGURE **Nº 9d**

Cy van der Spuy, *Ester Roman was the first woman to wear pants*, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

Explaining the book project, *Ester Roman was the first woman to wear pants*, Cy van der Spuy (2023) writes:

> Esther Roman is the rebellious daughter of a pastor who built the first church in Retreat, Cape Town in the 1960s. We follow her audacious young adulthood in the 80s as she leaves home for the snow-lined pavements of Toronto, in exile. It's a story of a woman discovering independence while finding herself looking back at 'The Mountain' in a city thirteen thousand kilometres away from home.

Similarly to the other examples mentioned thus far, Van der Spuy engaged in personal interviews with the protagonist and was able to document comments verbatim, which she utilised as both text and image devices to convey the narrative. The quotes used for chapter titles and pull quotes are powerful statements, and their visual representations lure the reader into engaging with the book's content

on multiple levels (Figure 9). Van der Spuy controls each aspect of the book's narrative – text, image and typography – which engages the reader on multiple levels. This relates directly to our hypothesis that effective design needs to inform, educate, and entertain with empathy and authenticity.

Notably, at the outset of the ID book project spanning more than two decades, students generally found the inclusion of the creative writing process daunting. However, to their surprise, it became easy for most after they concluded their research and interview processes. As they became confident with writing because they had intimate knowledge of their subject matter, this flowed into the other aspects of the project, most notably tone of voice, empathy, and authenticity.

These selective examples demonstrate, to varying degrees, Cezzar's (2020) concepts of *translation*, *creation*, and *articulation* in practice. They demonstrate the importance of designers' writing and *auteur* skills – how these skills impact visual communication design practice, and how they benefit designers on various levels during their student and professional careers.

Act three: The wrap-up

> Behind a well-crafted, emotionally resonant design lies the power of story. It is how we relate to the people we are designing for. When viewed as protagonists, designers are more adept at identifying and empathising with their audience (Quintana 2018).

In conclusion, we would like to pose two considerations regarding writing as a design medium as it relates to the arguments presented above.

First is the issue of writing as a design specialisation. As we have pointed out, when viewing writing as an act of generating copy, we are essentially ring-fencing it to the domain of the copywriter, exclusively. We suggest that viewing design and writing as isolated silos not only overlooks the rhetorical interplay between the two, but is also an inherently implausible notion. Writing is intrinsic to design thinking in both a practical and technical sense. Writing is a way of thinking through ideas as verbal-visual brainstorming. Over and above this, the *act* of writing is itself a thinking tool. In developing the ability to write, ideas become clearer, thoughts are more organised, and critical thinking improves. In this way, writing *is* design.

Secondly, as design (perhaps most evidently in branding and UX design) becomes ever more globalised and, in turn, democratised, we are witnessing a continuously

homogeneous world culture – a monoculture (Rath 2020:18). In the face of a global push toward 'universalism', one of the challenges facing designers is that of localising content (Rath 2020:17). As Thomas Oosthuizen (2004), Tim Brown (2008), and Julianna Jones (2011) suggest, the importance of engaging in design for a local context is because it inspires not only empathy with participants in the design process, and ultimately, the audience, but it also develops a sense reactiveness in the designer to anticipate and respond to larger global issues (Davis cited by Frascara 2020:110-112).

One such pertinent issue is the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI), where "cold" software is being used to harvest copy. The process is relatively easy, whereby merely feeding prompts into an AI algorithm, a designer (or, indeed, anyone) can generate reasonably "appropriate" content. However, it is possible to argue that the extent to which meaningful writing – writing that inspires a sense of seriously empathetic, well-researched storytelling – is questionable.

Interestingly, with the rise of generative AI tools, the importance of design-writing is perhaps made clearer. Why write when you can generate? (Why Write?). Writing, as we have outlined, is more than just the act of generating text; it's also about exploring ideas in a divergent way that is then synthesised, structured, and translated to make it palatable for the reader – a complicated, multifaceted process that, we maintain, currently remains unmatched for generative tools to reproduce with genuine authenticity and earnest. Moreover, it is possible to argue that AI generation will be of little benefit to designers in the context of documentary design projects like the examples above. This is because in reflectively documenting their subjects' stories, the designer/author would ideally seek to capture the subjects' "authentic voice". To a large extent, AI tools cannot generate narratives based on unrecorded events, experiences, or emotions – they can only simulate approximate examples.

Typography, in both its linguistic (writing) and formal (typeface) sense, is arguably one of the most rhetorically potent tools to respond to this homogenisation since it most readily engages in issues surrounding *translation*. Unlike many other forms of design (photography and illustration, for example), type must, as a "dual" language, service a global community but also respond, in an acutely tailored way, to the local audience. As the colloquialism goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Conversely, writing is worth the specific words, phrasing, structure, and grammar that a designer implements. Writing is, therefore, far less amenable to "interpretation".

Type also occupies roughly half of any design, and in a world where user-interfaces (in UX, AI, AR, VR and many others) have come to dominate our visual landscape,

type becomes ever-more important as a navigational, translative and narrative tool. Many of our daily interactions with technology rely less on the iconographic visual, which means typography might prove more valuable than other, traditional design media. Developing writing skills, argues Xiao (2018), is essential to crafting experiences that are memorable and personal.

Writing, in particular, helps us articulate designs so that they can be evaluated by different audiences. The written word helps ideas spread quickly, to inform, persuade, or entertain. While visuals are important, words can help articulate the hard work and difficult decisions made behind the scenes. When communication is clear, the ideas are easily understood, which means they can be properly evaluated. In this way, again, writing *is* design.

Notes

1. In the context of this article, we are not referring to writing for design research – a primarily (although not exclusively) academic field concerned with techniques and best practices for writing in academic register on matters surrounding literary design, design inquiry, and criticism.
2. Some noteworthy contributions include but are not limited to Tschichold (1928), Warde (1930), Rand (1947), Ruder (1981), Buchanan (1985; 1990; 1992; 2001), Kinross (1985), McCoy (1988), Norman (1988), Bringhurst (1992), Frascara (2002), Cross (2003), Dorst (2006; 2015), Brown (2009), and Davis (2012).
3. By this, Meyer and Norman (2019:20) mean that traditional design curricula perpetuate the teaching and learning of manual skills typical of the 'studio format.' As a result, students only acquire a light and superficial understanding of the problems they are presented with, and in doing so, they produce designers who are trained to treat symptoms rather than the underlying root causes of a given design "problem."
4. As educators, we have a combined teaching experience, locally and abroad, of over 40 years.
5. The term, "multidisciplinary" is often conflated with terms such as "inter-" and "transdisciplinary." To clarify, multidisciplinarity refers to a broad range of skills or competencies that an *individual* designer acquires. However, this is typically gained through work-based experience and often in silos. A multidiscipline designer might have a good knowledge of various design media, technical skills, conceptual strategy, and so on, Interdisciplinarity, in contrast, is typically used to describe the combined skills of a *group* of practitioners. It is more passive in the sense that the individual designer is not given agency to act beyond the "group think." Finally, in the context of this study, transdiciplinarity refers to a combined skill set that a designer gains through keen interest and understanding of vocational insight, user experiences, technical skill, and so on that shape an inquisitive, compassionate and civically minded designer – something vaguely akin to Tim Brown's 'T-shaped' designer.
6. Rath has since obtained his Masters (2015) and Doctoral (2024) degrees in typographic design as a rhetorical design tool within, specifically, design education.
7. The ID programme is underpinned by an integrated approach to professional training, academic

education and creative development. A "1-2-1" principle is adopted over the four years and the course is structured around three phases, namely beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Moreover, the ID programme is project-based, whereby each project is typically an integration of several design pedagogies, which is frequently formulated, led and assessed by expert, practising designers. This approach is intended to equip students with the necessary skills, flexibility in changing design aptitudes and the willingness to gain exposure to various practices, user experiences and so on, once they graduate (Information Design IOW400 Study Guide 2024).

8. Guy Julier (2000:2) remarks on the importance of recognising design as more akin to problem-processing than problem-solving. The latter, he argues, is reductive in that the focus is on solution-orientated outcomes rather than reflective, deep thinking.

9. Some of its forms include strategy (writing rationales or sales pitches), copywriting (translating a brand voice through hard-sell pitches), creative writing (literary writing for editorial design), corporate writing (for brochures or annual reports), technical writing (instructional, informative and user experience design), narrative writing (scripts for film, animations or videos and so on), scholarly writing, journalistic writing (including blogging), free writing for conceptualisation (notes, brain maps, spider diagrams and so on that organise ideas to structure all of the others), and lastly, naming (for products or services).

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